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ABSTRACT

A study examined the characteristics of those individuals who participate in New York City's adult literacy programs. Interviews were conducted with 32 native-born U.S. citizens (native speakers of English) who had enrolled in a literacy program for the first time and had been reading somewhere up to the 4.9 grade level at the time they entered their literacy program. Nine (eight females and one male) first heard about their literacy program through a radio or television advertisement. Five each heard about literacy programming from friends, family, and other agencies. Seventeen of the 32 people interviewed reported that they had to wait before beginning their programs, with 3 persons waiting between 4 and 6 months. The top five reasons/goals given for attending a literacy program (in order of decreasing frequency) were to pass the General Educational Development Tests, obtain job training, undergo self-improvement, achieve independence, receive social support, and end embarrassment. The major factors that positively affected attendance were family support, perceived progress, heightened self-esteem, and good teachers. All of the respondents had dropped out of school; 27 had at least one parent from a southern state; and 23 were currently unemployed. (A bibliography and the interview form with instructions for administering it are appended.) (MN)

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Starting Over:
Characteristics of Adult Literacy Learners

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This project, which usually would take six months to complete, has been completed in a month and a half. Under these less than optimal conditions, particularly the relentless pressure of time, the staff worked together harmoniously. It would not have been possible had it not been for the cooperation and support of Joan Manes, John Garvey, Deborah Fish Ragin, and Verna Haskins Denny from the Literacy Assistance Center; staff members from the five adult literacy sites including Jeanne Cowan, Cynthia Isaacs, and Georgia Sally from the Brooklyn Public Library; Judy Alladice, Betty Rifkin, Joyce Hyman, Nancy Steinke, and Myra Baum from the New York City Board of Education; Richard Courage, Judy Landy, Beatrix Sierra from New York Technical College; and Barbara Strayhorn and Lloyd Smith from the Brooklyn Urban League as well as the adults who volunteered and were willing to allow us to tell their stories. The five interviewers, Susan Scullin, Allan DeFina, Barbara Greenfield, Marla Walker, and Candace Chaleff put up with late night meetings, irregular interview schedules, and extra transcription time. Michael Parker kept the project staff organized and on schedule and helped with writing as did Dorothy Deegan who spent several sleepless days analyzing data and writing this report. My thanks goes out to you all! Finally I would like to thank the Literacy Assistance Center for their interest in this descriptive research project and their commitment to this type of research demonstrated by their funding of the project.

M. Trika Smith-Burke
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June 1987

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PREFACE

With the start of the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative in 1984, a large increase was seen in the number of adult literacy students served by literacy programs in the City. With this increase came a pressing need for more information on various aspects of literacy programs including: who is being served, what and how many programs are available, what types of instruction are offered, and who provides these services.

Three studies commissioned by the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC) in 1986, and funded through the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative, provided preliminary information to inform future research in this field. These studies were: "Adult Literacy Education: A Review of the Research and Priorities for Further Inquiry," by Gordon G. Darkenwald, Ph.D; "Study of Adult Literacy Curricula," by Matrices Consultants, Inc., and "Adult Literacy Program Personnel Profile," by Metis Associates, Inc. One area found to be in need of further research was the population of the adult basic education students, or those students who read between the 0.0 and 4.9 grade levels. Thus, adult basic education students was selected as one of the priority areas for research in 1987.

Two studies were commissioned to explore, in greater detail, the characteristics of adult literacy students in New York City. The LAC commissioned Metis Associates, Inc. to do one study to analyze data collected through the New York City citywide data base and Dr. M. Trika Smith-Burke was commissioned to do an in-depth case study of a sample of these students. The purpose of the Metis study was to obtain basic demographic information which, among other things would: provide a demographic portrait the adult students in NYC; offer a wealth of information which would help inform directions for future research; and establish a large data base of adult literacy students in NYC which could be used in future research.

The case study by Dr. Smith-Burke of New York University, an expert in the field of reading, was intended to inform this demographic profile by providing a fuller picture of these adult students, their motivation for enrolling in adult programs, their personal and professional goals and their reasons for continuing in or leaving programs.

"Starting Over: Characteristics of Adult Literacy Learners," addresses these issues through a case study-like approach to data collection and analysis. Through the self reports of 32 current literacy students this study provides, for the City of New York, the first in-depth examination of adult basic education students, which is crucial to understanding the current patterns of recruitment and retention in New York City.

It is not possible to thank by name everyone who assisted in this study; however the following people deserve special recognition:

- M. Trika Smith-Burke, principal investigator whose extensive research experience, committment to adult literacy and dedication to this project were essential for the successful completion of this research.

- Michael Parker and Dorothy Deegan who gave unselfishly of their time to assist in conducting the study and writing the final report.

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Finally, a special thanks to the 32 students who participated in this study and shared their experiences with us in the hope that this information would assist us in our efforts to serve the needs of the adult literacy students in New York City.

Jacqueline Cook
Executive Director

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Research Coordinator

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1986 the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC) sponsored a conference at New York University. Representatives from state, city and private agencies which provide adult literacy instruction and researchers from universities and colleges interested in literacy met in order to continue planning of the long range research agenda for LAC.

One of the major topics to emerge from this meeting was the need for more detailed, descriptive information about adults whose reading grade equivalency scores range from 0.0 to 4.9. Relatively little is known about this group's educational and life histories and how these factors relate to their current status as learners.

The "Adult Literacy Project" was planned to begin to collect information focused on the characteristics of adult literacy learners who have come back to school "to start over again". Originally this project was to be a series of in-depth, ethnographic interviews of a small sample of adults. However, funding and time constraints necessitated that the project assume two phases: Phase I involving a structured interview and Phase II involving the use of ethnographic techniques for in-depth study.

Students to be included in this study were to meet the following criteria:

- Enrolled for the first time in a given literacy program from July 1986 to the time of the study;
- Native-born U.S. citizens;

- Native English speaker;
- Reading between 0.0 - 4.9 grade level at entry.

In the first phase, 58 adults were interviewed for one hour. Thirty-two participants from this group fit the study's criteria and provided the data on which this report is based. Data from the first phase of this project will also allow for the structured interview to be improved for future use. The second phase will take place in the fall of 1987, pending funding. At that time ethnographic techniques will be used to follow up on several of the participants and produce several detailed case studies.

This report will address the following research questions:

How do adults find out about literacy programs?

How easy or difficult is it to gain entry into a literacy program?

What makes the adults decide to attend these programs? What are their goals?

What factors are possible influences on attendance or drop-out rates?

What is the educational background of the participants? How does this history relate to the participants' current educational status?

What are the significant events in the life histories of the participants? How do these events relate to the participants' current life and educational situations?

This report should provide some of the needed information about beginning adult literacy learners and identify important questions for future research.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

It has become increasingly more difficult to escape the national call for literacy education on a massive scale. Once confined to pedagogical circles, illiteracy has become a national issue in the 1980's. As part of Project Literacy U.S. (P.L.U.S.), major television networks have recently devoted much time to exploring the nature and dimension of illiteracy in the United States. National news magazines and America's major newspapers routinely cover the literacy front. And the reports, we are repeatedly told, are not encouraging. In a time when it is difficult for politicians to agree on a wide range of topics, the one topic that virtually all can embrace is the need to bring all Americans up to a minimal reading level.

But as the call becomes louder it has become even more evident that the debate continues with no resolution in sight. That debate concerns what we mean by literacy or, conversely, illiteracy. Illiteracy was born with the invention of the first writing system (Goody & Watt, 1972). Throughout history, until the very recent past, the ability to read and write has wavered in importance (Resnick & Resnick, 1977). Initially the literate class was a separate, usually elite, stratum. By the 18th and 19th centuries, literacy had become more broad-based. But, for various political and social reasons, there were people who were left out of this democratization of education, or for whom access did not insure attainment of literacy. Now in the latter part of

the twentieth century we are witnessing a unique phenomenon: a growing number of people perceived as illiterate. In many societies the dominant literate culture perceives this group as personally deficient and unlikely to contribute positively to the community at large. In fact this population is often seen as a drain on the community resources. Although there are only a few studies describing this population, current research (Fingeret, 1982, 1985) shows that this perception is not always accurate.

The idea that acquisition of literacy is a prerequisite to personal and community enrichment dates back at least to the 1940's. Literacy has been seen as the "essential means to the achievement of a fuller and more creative life" (UNESCO, 1947, in Levine, 1982, p.115). Responding to its own study of world illiteracy, UNESCO inaugurated a World Campaign for Universal Literacy which was based on a definition contending that "a person is literate when he has acquired the essential knowledge and skills which enable him...to use these skills towards his own and the community's development" (Harman, 1970, p.227). This campaign, abandoned in 1964, served as an impetus in the U. S. Government's efforts to deal with literacy within its own borders. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 is explicit as to the aims of the adult education programs it created. These programs were for adults

> whose inability to read or write the English language constitutes a substantial impairment of their ability to get or retain employment commensurate with their real ability, so as to

> help eliminate such inability and raise the level of education of such individuals with a view to making them less likely to become dependent on others, to improving their ability to benefit from occupational training and otherwise increasing their opportunities for more productive and profitable employment, and making them better able to meet their adult responsibilities (Harman, 1970, p.235).

As late as 1969 the U. S. Office of Education related "the ability to hold a decent job to support self and family, to lead a life of dignity and pride" to literacy skills (Harman, 1970, p.235).

But what is it exactly that makes one literate? The answer is not simple (see particularly Valentine, 1986). Well into this century literacy usually meant the ability to write one's name. But beyond this simplistic view, literacy has generally been determined by how well one does on standardized reading tests, by school grade attainment, or by one's ability to perform given tasks which demand some degree of reading and writing. Problems are inherent in each method. Standardized tests measure a finite amount of knowledge, ignoring areas of knowledge and skills which those who designed the tests have implicitly or explicitly deemed unimportant or inappropriate. What amounts to cultural biases in terms of the choice of tasks, topics, and style and genre of language profoundly affect performance on such tests (McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1981; Gee, 1987). Determination of literacy acquisition by grade attainment has also proven unsatisfactory (Levine, 1982). At a time when our schools are under attack for a variety of reasons, it is clear that there are no across-the-

board standards. Completion of grade six in one school system, for instance, cannot necessarily be equated with completion of grade six in another system; the first system may be either better or worse (Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977-1978; Darling, 1981). Further, to say that one is literate by completing any given grade is tantamount to saying that prior to completion of that grade that person is illiterate (Stedman & Kaestle, 1987). To equate literacy with grade achievement is to discount a potentially vast amount of knowledge and prior experience a person may have. Finally, recent studies (Diehl & Mikulecky, 1980; Mikulecky, 1982) have demonstrated that workers may be highly print-competent if that print is job-related while being unable to read other kinds of texts. This ability to decode and comprehend job-related texts suggests that workers are competent readers when familiar with the topic and text format.

Responding to an obvious need for a new definition of literacy, recent research (Guthrie & Kirsch, 1984) has suggested that the concept of literacy itself needs to be expanded. We find ourselves in the midst of a movement away from simple measurements of tasks as a definition of literacy to one that acknowledges the many facets of individuals and their lives. Scribner and Cole's work (1980) among the Vai in Liberia has contended forcefully that literacy may have little to do with formal education; that persons' cognitive abilities, their abilities to think abstractly, is not necessarily limited by their abilities to read and write. Heath's ethnographic study of

two southeastern American towns has been just as significant in suggesting that since literacy is used in a variety of contexts, those contexts must be considered when trying to understand literacy. Social and cultural contexts determine meaning as much for literacy as they do for language (Bormuth, 1973-1974; Guthrie & Kirsch, 1984; Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977-1978; Heath, 1986, 1983; Hunter & Harman, 1979). Guthrie and Kirsch (1984) extend this idea by arguing for the idea of "literacies", suggesting that a single concept of literacy is not adequate to meet the various uses of reading and writing in different contexts. Fingeret (1982) has pointed out the complexities of the lives of a group of illiterate adults and describes the importance of the social network through which members of this group relate and function successfully. Her work seriously challenges the current stereotype of adult illiterates. We recognize today that if adult basic education (ABE)[1] programs are to be effective they must be tailored to individual needs and differences rather than assume the same curriculum to be appropriate for all persons. The question is then raised as to who the adult learner is. We suggest, as others have earlier, that it is necessary to look beyond the race, ethnicity, and social class of ABE students and focus on more substantive issues: what has brought this population into programs; what motivates them to continue; what prompts the adult learners to discontinue their participation.

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[1]. In this report the term ABE refers to programs of basic education which focus on basic skills. It does not include programs of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Such considerations prompt other questions. Do we know who strives to become literate, for instance, and what motivated them to make what is clearly a major decision regarding their lives? What do literacy students perceive literacy to be and how do they see literacy acquisition affecting their lives? What do we know about the past educational and life experiences and the current life situations of adult students which might be beneficial in curriculum and program design?

Some researchers have explored beyond the demographic data and have surfaced data concerning the individual learner. For example, studies suggest that only a small percentage of adults who qualify for inclusion in adult basic education programs (whatever standard for inclusion one elects to use) actually choose to participate in such programs (Balmuth, 1986; Garrison, 1985; Glustrom, 1983; Scanlan, 1986). Balmuth's review of the literature which focuses on program design and management, addresses the issues of attendance and retention. Absenteeism for students enrolled in programs is what Balmuth calls a "fact of life" (p.31). She cites numerous studies which testify to low and/or irregular class attendance in ABE programs nationally. When there is an obvious connection between reading achievement and class attendance, it is incumbent upon us to explore the reasons why these students do not attend class. Are these reasons related to a student's life situation or to the program itself? While it is convenient to suspect an individual's personal circumstances, more empirical evidence is called for to

confirm or reject that hypothesis.

Beyond absenteeism is the issue of attrition in ABE programs which has been called the "plague of all adult education programs" (Harman, 1970, p. 235). While a few interview studies have suggested again that the problem of attrition is more often related to a student's life situation than to a program, we must wonder if existing ABE programs are designed to encourage continued participation. Extensive research in this area is lacking thus far. It is Anderson and Darkenwald's observation that "we know little about the economic, psychological, and social forces that affect participation and persistence in adult education" (1979, p.17). In addition, Darkenwald has found a dearth of actual research on adult learners. He contends that from 1975 to 1980 fewer than a dozen of the 236 published articles on adult literacy qualify as research. His computerized and hand searches of the literature through 1985 forced him to draw the same conclusion. A similar search for this project covering the additional material published through January 1987 reveals comparable findings (Parker, 1987). While many people write about adult literacy and hold tenaciously to ideas as to how it might be achieved, there is an obvious need for empirical studies to support and/or challenge our beliefs. Such information is critical as we contemplate expanding existing programs and designing new ones for the future.

As Balmuth (1986) and Fingeret (1983) cogently argue, the least amount of information is available about the adult

beginning reader/writer who tests at the 0.0 to 4.9 level. The purpose of the first phase of this project was to conduct interviews with such adult students from representative programs sites in New York City. Questions posed in this study covered both the program, and the students' educational and life histories in an attempt to provide the preliminary information needed on these students.

In this report, the following research questions are addressed:

> How do adults find out about literacy programs?
>
> How easy or difficult is it to gain entry into a literacy program?
>
> What makes the adults decide to attend these programs? What are their goals?
>
> What factors are possible influences on attendance or dropout rates?
>
> What is the educational background of the participants? How does this history relate to the participants' current educational status?
>
> What are the significant events in the life histories of the participants? How do these events relate to the participants' current life and educational situations?

METHODOLOGY

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERVIEW

In order to gather information on how educational and life experiences have influenced both the adult beginning readers' decisions to participate and their involvement in basic education programs, a one-hour structured interview was developed. The work of Balmuth (1986), Darkenwald (1986), Fingeret (1982, 1983, 1985), and Lytle (1986) provided research findings on which the questions were based. Particularly important were the issues concerning: how adults learned of potential programs; how they decided on which programs to attend and whether to remain in or to leave these programs; which goals they established; and how they define literacy.

After the questionnaire was drafted, members of the Literacy Assistance Center staff and several adult literacy teachers reviewed the interview. Revisions were made based on their comments. It then was piloted and revised twice. Feedback was solicited from two site coordinators and from Fingeret and Lytle (personal communication). The final draft of the interview was piloted by the team of eight interviewers after which only minor changes were made.

The final version of the interview consisted of an introduction to explain the purpose of the interview to the

participants and their rights as volunteers in the project, and four additional sections: Program Participation, Life Situation, Past Life and Educational Experiences, and Current Job History.

INTERVIEWERS

Five interviewers were hired to assist the project director, the project coordinator, and the Research Coordinator from Literacy Assistance Center in conducting the interviews. The major criteria used in selecting the interviewers were: 1) the ability to relate well to people; and 2) interest in adult learners and literacy. The entire interviewing staff of eight consisted of six females and two males. Two of the females were Black; the remaining six were Caucasian.

Two orientation meetings were held. The first session acquainted the interviewers with the project and specifically with the interview. They were asked to conduct the interview several times before the second meeting, preferably with beginning adult readers or other adults. The need to know the interview questionnaire thoroughly and the ability to complete each interview in an hour was stressed. The second training session centered on a discussion of the interviewers' pilot sessions and how to solve the problems they had encountered. The interviewers were also asked to keep a journal of personal comments during the project.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The Research Coordinator from Literacy Assistance Center selected five program sites in Manhattan and Brooklyn, recognizing that students from Manhattan alone might bias the results. These five sites represented four of the provider agencies whose programs are available to ABE students in New York City. Two of the five sites, West Side High School in Manhattan, and the Brooklyn Adult Training Center in Brooklyn are part of the New York City Board of Education program. Also participating were the Brooklyn Public Library, the Brooklyn Urban League, and the Manhattan branch of New York City Technical College (City University of New York). Initial contact with each program administrator was made by the Research Coordinator at LAC, who explained the nature of the project and the criteria established for student participants. Personal visits to each site followed to reiterate the criteria and to work out scheduling. Each site coordinator was then asked to provide the names of 12 volunteer students who might volunteer for this study and who would accurately reflect that program's composition with regard to age, race, sex, and attendance in day or evening programs, and who met the four criteria: entry into their current program no earlier than July 1986; reading between 0.0 and 4.9 at entry into the program; native born Americans; and native English speakers.

Arrangements were made at each site to provide private space in which to conduct the interviews. Both site coodinators and student participants were informed in advance that the interviews would be taped unless the student objected but that the interviews would be considered confidential, available only to the project staff. Each participant was given five dollars remuneration presented with a hand-written thank you note.

Initially 58 students were scheduled to be interviewed; two additional students were added later. Of that total, 48 ABE students were actually interviewed. The ethnic backgrounds of the 48 students interviewed are presented in Table 1.

TABLE I

Ethnic Background of Students Interviewed (N=48)

ETHNIC GROUP	NUMBER
Hispanic	8
Caribbean	4
Caucasian	2
Black American	34
Total	48

However, not all students met the criteria. Eight students were Hispanic whose home language was Spanish; and four were from

Caribbean nations, where dialects of English are spoken. Hence, data from these interviews were not included in this report. In addition, one interview could not be used because it contained insufficient information. Since there were only two Caucasians of different ages and only one person under age 20, these three interviews were not included in this analysis. The final sample consisted of 32 Black Americans; 20 females and 12 males. Three of the females and four of the males attended night classes (see Table II for a breakdown by age, sex, and time of program). Since this sample is not random but instead includes more females and more daytime participants, all conclusions must be viewed with this in mind. All interviews were done during class time and within a two-week period.

TABLE II

Sample Population by Age, Sex, and Attendance Time (N=32)

AGE	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	TOTAL
Male/a.m.	1	5	1	1	0	8
Male/p.m.	0	0	1	2	1	4
Female/a.m.	2	8	3	2	2	17
Female/p.m.	0	2	1	0	0	3
Total	3	15	6	5	3	32

ANALYSIS OF DATA

A content analysis of the data was performed for each research question. To prepare the data for analysis a separate data file was created for each question. Relevant data was copied into each file from the participants' original protocols. This made analysis of a particular question more manageable. Next a coding system was created based on findings from the research literature (e.g. for Question 1 categories such as family, friends, TV/radio were included). In addition, categories were modified and/or added to the coding system when clear patterns were derived from the data. For example, since the category in Question 1, Recommended by Agencies, masked the differences between women and men, it was divided into two separate categories: 1) welfare agencies; and, 2) other agencies or programs. The data were then coded by category in relation to the age and sex of the respondents and the time of program. Percentages were calculated when appropriate.

It is important to remember that these results are based on self-report data. The fact that an individual did not mention an issue does not necessarily mean that this issue is of no relevance to the person. Since information in this study was not cross-checked with information from the agencies or teachers, it must be viewed as the participants' beliefs and perceptions of the world. Also, data in the categories for some of the questions are not independent, since participants often gave multiple reasons/responses.

RESULTS

RESEARCH QUESTION 1:

<u>How do adults find out about literacy programs?</u>

Ultimately, the decision to seek and participate in a program that may change one's life is made individually. Yet, so often, along the road to the decision, people in one's life provide the impetus for change. The acquisition of literacy for an adult undoubtedly constitutes a major change in that person's life, and learning where to go to find help is usually the first step toward this change. Hence, it was crucial to this investigation to learn where information about literacy programs was found. Was it located by the learner, perhaps through non-print media, or was it provided through family and/or friends?

Past studies stress the instrumental role played by family and peer group members. Bock states that "among undereducated adults, personal sources are more effective than non-personal sources" (1980, p. 125). Cross' findings support this contention. She concludes that "Information disseminated via media...serves well-educated people best" (1978, p. 46).

However, in this study (see Table III), nine of those interviewed indicated that they had initially heard of their respective programs through ads presented on either radio or television. Eight of the persons who learned of literacy

programs in this way were female. Does this mean that more females than males watch TV? This might possibly be true since more of these females are non-working and at home during daytime hours. This is an area that should be investigated further.

Table III

Sources of Program Information for Adult Illiterates (N=32)

SOURCE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
TV/Radio	1	8	9
Friends	4	1	5
Family	3	2	5
Welfare	0	4	4
Other Agencies	2	3	5
Miscellaneous	2	2	4
	--	--	--
Total	12	20	32

Two others interviewed found literacy programs on their own. One woman said that she walked around her neighborhood to "see what they offer." When she came across a center she "came inside." Another male found himself accompanying young children to the library as part of his housing authority job. He "felt ashamed" that he had not finished school but saw signs advertising adult literacy programs and took home pamphlets

pertaining to these programs.

Although this sample is not large enough to disaffirm the findings which point to the primary effectiveness of personal intervention, many of today's non-readers, inclusive of those well into their forties, have grown up with television. This may be showing its effect. One respondant quoted the ad which states, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." Besides this possible increased susceptibility to non-personal messages transmitted via media, the quality and quantity of ads could also be a contributing factor to their effectiveness. Present studies must consider the impact of programs like Project Literacy, U.S. (PLUS), which combined TV, newspaper, and community efforts to advertise.

Still, a quarter of the respondents heard about the various programs through family members. One male in his mid-thirties mentioned that his mother "knows about my academic rating"; another male in his late twenties said that his mother, a nurse, had been looking for a place for him to go for some time. Two people had relatives in literacy programs while one woman heard about it through her sons who were enrolled in a high school equivalency program. In contrast with the group who learned about programs on their own, two-thirds of this group were males.

The question arises as to the perceived importance of literacy within the family group. Would a family feel a greater urgency for its male members to achieve these skills that are

clearly prerequisite for entry into, or upward mobility in, the world of work? Perhaps these males live in households where the female is already literate and assumes the responsibilities that require literacy and which she might now wish to share with another family member. Again, only future research can answer these questions.

Friends also were cited as providing initial assistance to these adult learners. One student knew a friend in a program, another had a long-term friend who taught in a program, while a fifty-year old man found out that a member of his church attended a literacy program. It is interesting to note that all of these friends as well as some family members had an affiliation with adult literacy. Throughout these interviews, and evident in previous research, is the mention of the embarrassment and shame in being illiterate. The question that surfaces concerns whether adult learners share their concern about their lack of literacy with many friends or whether they are cautious in their inquiries, only divulging their secret to those they are sure will understand. This study points to the latter. Or do friendships with people who have already developed literacy provide role models and/or incentives to acquire literacy? Only with more research can these hypotheses be tested.

The final group is comprised of those who learned of their programs through governmental and private agencies. Municipal welfare offices provided the information to four female clients. Case workers seem to ask routinely if the clients wish

to further their education and, obtaining a postitive response, suggest the program that could best suit their needs. Two males, seeking employment at a state agency, learned after taking a test that they needed to improve their reading skills. This agency provided them with information about where such skills could be learned. One woman was told of a program through her mental health agency. Finally, a sixty-five year old man found that he could not deal with the demands of the GED program in which he was enrolled. "I told her my main problem was I wanted to read and spell. I wanted to learn to spell. She said we don't have it (reading classes). She recommended I come here. So this is it!"

RESEARCH QUESTION 2:

<u>How easy or difficult is it to gain entry into a literacy program?</u>

Only one female respondant in her early thirties mentioned that she had shopped around for her program so it is hypothesized that the rest probably enrolled in either the first program they heard of or one close to home or work. Each of the 32 persons interviewed told of taking a test at the first session but only four voiced their reactions: two said it was easy, one had difficulties, and one was "scared". Tests have become such a mainstay of our society that even adult literacy students who, at best, struggle with paper and pencil tasks, accept them as inevitable and do not seem to get upset when put in testing situations. How effective these tests are in assessing adults' actual ability to read and write functionally is another question worthy of further dicussion. Adults in this study seemed to use tests as one of the major criteria by which they judged themselves and also seemed to believe that when they do well on tests that they will be able to read almost anything.

One female, however, was annoyed that test results from previous programs had not been transferred. This issue of establishing lines of communication between programs needs to be looked at more closely. One male in this study mentioned that he had attended another literacy program until he found that his present one better suited his schedule. Another female attended two programs simultaneously; she felt that she needed the

additional help provided by the second, tutorial program. Much could be gained if an inter-agency communications network existed to eliminate over-testing and provide a means to share diagnostic and instructional information for each student when needed.

Five adult learners specifically said that they did not have to wait long for the preliminary session. However, one fifty-year-old man said that he had to return to the center three times before someone was available to test and interview him. He said he felt he had to "command the guy to get in." Seventeen of the 32 interviewed reported that they had to wait before beginning their programs (see Table IV).

TABLE IV

Waiting Period for Entry into Literacy Programs (N=17)

WAITING PERIOD	NUMBER OF PERSONS
2-3 weeks	7
1-3 months	6
4-6 months	3
one year/longer	1
---	--
TOTAL	17

Of the three adults who waited four to six months, two persons had to wait some weeks for a tutor but were invited to come to the center while waiting for a tutor. The third said

that he was given computer assisted instruction (CAI) during the month that he waited to be assigned to someone.

The reasons for delays in beginning sessions could involve issues as critical as shortages of instructors or as mundane as poor clerical follow-ups. But whatever the reasons they are equally unfortunate especially in light of the fact that between the initial contact and the first session the sense of urgency might wane, or the embarrassment might return. It is impossible to know how many prospective adult students are lost in this way, but based on these findings, it is evident that the potential for discouragement is great.

Five people had positive comments about the entry process, even though one had to wait for a long time. All addressed the kindness and helpfulness of the people in the centers. Ironically, one of these was a forty-three year old female who, after waiting a year, was admitted to a day program and, unable to attend during the day, had to wait another year to get into an evening program.

The five negative comments were mostly directed at extensive waiting times and unreturned telephone calls. One thirty-nine year old female told of waiting month after month to receive her notice to attend. After numerous phone calls proved non-productive she finally threatened to remain on the line until someone could answer her question. She was told to attend the next day. "I'm very patient. If I want something bad enough, I'll keep trying."

RESEARCH QUESTION 3:

What makes the adults decide to attend? What are their goals?

The rationale to couple the above questions was based upon the finding that, more often than not, the decision to attend a program was made with a goal in mind (see Table V). It should be restated here that this questionnaire represents self-reports. The categories of goals reported by respondents are not independent since participants sometimes gave more than one reason or goal for attending the programs. For this reason also, totals are reported for categories of reasons/goals only and not for sex.

The overwhelming motivating factor was job related. Sixteen of the respondents perceived a direct relationship between the attainment of literacy and employment opportunities. Eight persons within this group named specific careers which they said could be entered only through a demonstrated competency in reading and writing. Court officer, tractor-trailer driver, typist, and medical home attendant were mentioned. Respondents in their thirties seemed to feel a particular sense of urgency as witnessed by the fact that 10 of the 15 respondents aged 30-39 mentioned jobs as a goal. Slightly more than half of this group (n=6) were females.

It may be relevant to this observation to note that ten of the twenty women in this study were the sole providers for their children. Although the question was not specifically asked, four mentioned that they presently receive public assistance.

However, since only four of the twenty women questioned were employed it is possible that more may be receiving welfare or are supported by family members. It is possible that the desire to achieve literacy as a means of entering the skilled work force is prompted by the desire to provide support for their children.

TABLE V

Reasons/Goals for Attending Literacy Programs

REASON/GOAL	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
GED	2	10	12
Job Training	5	11	16
Self-improvement	4	7	11
Independence	4	3	7
Place to Be/ Social Support	1	3	4
Embarrassment	8	3	11
For the Family	3	4	7
Driver's License	0	2	2
Improve Language	2	5	7

Since 22 of the 32 adults in this study were unemployed, it is understandable that this concern for jobs was predominant. One thirty-two year old unemployed male stated, "I would just like to have a job with a decent salary. Sitting home ain't going to get it." It is important to state here that this number of

unemployed should be interpreted with caution since 24 of those interviewed attended day programs. What this suggests is that the unemployed, particularly females, are often more likely to select daytime programs (see Table VI).

TABLE VI

Day/Night Attendance by Sex and Unemployment (N=32)

	UNEMPLOYED		EMPLOYED		TOTAL
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Night	2	1	2	2	7
Day	3	15	5	2	25
	--	--	-	-	--
Total	5	16	7	4	32

Twelve adults mentioned attainment of a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) as a priority, making it the second most frequently cited reason for attending literacy programs. Five of this group who voiced a desire for a high school diploma also mentioned specific job aspirations. In this category a trend was detected for females, nine of whom singled out the GED as a primary goal. Five of these women were in their thirties while three were in their forties. For the over-fifty group only one person

projected her life after her GED: "Once I get my high school equivalency, I'm thinking of going to college. Maybe a two-year college."

Often the diploma was coveted primarily for personal reasons. When asked how she knew whether or not she was close to achieving her goal, one thirty-four year old female replied, "I can't tell until I get my GED in my hand and I can say I did something." Another woman, the same age, stated that she meant to be an example to her children,

> to show my kids that if you want something you have to fight to get it. And to prove to them that I'm back in school to learn more and get my GED and they can fight and stay in school and get theirs - not dropping out. Figure if they see Mama, they can do it too.

This desire to achieve a high school graduate status, though exemplary, might also be unrealistic and ultimately detrimental to some of the adults. Balmuth reports the results of the Portage Township study conducted in Indiana in 1981 where "it was found that 76% (or 140 out of 184) of students reading at the 0.0 to 4.9 grade level who left the program had entered because they expected it to help them pass the GED" (1986, p. 12). Often, however, learning enough to pass the GED may well exceed the amount of work which can be accomplished in a reasonable period of time. This question of establishing and communicating realistic goals in conjunction with the learner will be addressed later in this section and also within the context of the next

research question, specifically concerned with drop-out issues.

This study verifies additional findings of other research projects with regard to students' goals. Again, Balmuth's review of the research generalizes that "employment goals (to gain or upgrade employment), hopes related to children, and desire for self-improvement are among the strongest verbalized motives in almost every study" (1986, p. 11). This goal which relates to children, is interwoven throughout the text in many of the interviews. It is surely evidenced in this third category of responses which focuses on the learner's self-esteem or self-improvement. Four of the men and eight women voiced a desire to, as one respondant put it, "have something that will benefit me." A sixty-five year old man said, "It was time. I was embarrassed before. I'm not embarrassed now."

The topic of embarrassment came up in many of the interviews. One thirty-five year old woman clearly encapsulated its motivational effect.

> I have a six-year old that'll make you go to school. You be riding the buses with her and she ask you a question and you don't know what it is - it's embarrassing. And she'll ask you, 'What's the matter with you? Didn't you go to school?' This is what pushes me. She's six years old and she's got all of these questions she wants to ask. She wants you to spell this and that...She's my motivator. She always asks if I'm going to school tonight and if I say no she says, 'Well, it's up to you.' And I say, 'Well, she's right.'

A similar incident was reported by a thirty-seven year old man.

> My wife buys books for the kids. Most of the time the kids go to my wife, but one day my daughter asked me to read a story. I tried to read but got stuck on a word and my daughter helped and corrected me. I felt, then and there, to go back to school, since that day. I even cried like the guy and his daughter in the TV commercial. 'Stop feeling sorry for yourself at thirty-three years old', I said.

By and large, the number of men who spoke about embarrassment exceeded the number of women three to one. Most of these men spoke about feeling ashamed among peers or in the work place. Both personal and cultural factors might account for this trend. Future investigations might well pick up on this theme. Some managed to sidestep the embarrassment by devising elaborate coping strategies which allowed them to keep their illiteracy a secret. A thirty-two year old man describes how he maintained his secret on the job. "I memorized cans - tags to go down and get the order. I never told anyone." Darling's study (1981) of recruitment strategies reported that few employed BE students chose to reveal their problems with print to their employers but did tend to share this information with co-workers. Similarly, most respondents in this study who had mentioned literacy on the job reported that they kept their problem a well-guarded secret. However, one male in his early forties told of an employer who was influential in getting him involved in a literacy program. "My boss noticed I couldn't relate to a lot of things he wanted me to relate to and he asked me did I want to go back to

school."

The negative psychological effects of being unable to cope in a world filled with print are obvious. Still, a third of all respondents verbalized their determination to put the embarrassment aside and begin taking an active, open role in their lives as learners. "I had to make a stand, to push myself", said a thirty-seven year old man. Most perceived that the major benefit from having taken this risk would be independence. Asked if she has seen any difference in her life, a thirty-five year old woman answered that, for the first time, she felt "independent, proud of myself. My kids are proud of me and that makes me feel good." Another woman about the same age said, "Reading will sure make you happy. It make you feel like you're somebody." For her, reading is not only accessing information but more importantly a sign of advancement.

Of course, the only promise made by adult literacy programs is that they will provide instruction in literacy, usually interpreted as the ability to read and write. Learning is the objective, yet the goals already cited, the ones that have to do with aspects of personal well-being and self-esteem, are highest on the students' agendas. Nevertheless, the aim to learn also prevails and students had definite ideas about what literacy is and how one might teach it.

In response to the questionnaire all respondents were asked to talk about what is easy and hard about reading and writing. Most said that their primary problem involved breaking up words

into sound segments for reading and spelling, punctuation, and grammar for writing. It is interesting to note that these "definitions" of reading and writing mirror the definitions of poor readers (e.g. Allington, 1983) and poor writers (e.g. Birnbaum, 1982) who focus on the form and not the functional aspects of comprehension (i.e. understanding with a purpose for reading in mind) and composing (i.e. writing with audience and intent in mind). Few of the adults in the sample mentioned comprehension and composing directly. One male in his mid-thirties said that he would like to "be able to read and write to where I understand it." Some did mention writing letters and/or messages.

These findings raise another pertinent research question: did these adults already hold these beliefs concerning reading and writing or are they being shaped by the instruction that they are receiving? Since teachers were not interviewed or observed in this study, few conclusions could be reached. However, several researchers have found that teachers' mental models of the reading process influence the instructional program (Bawden, Buike, & Duffy, 1979; DeFord, 1985) which in turn shapes students' views of the reading process, expectations for instruction, and their reading strategies. Since the predominant student view in this study stressed learning the letters, decoding, and spelling, students may eventually find that their progress does not meet their expectations due to the fact that both decoding and comprehension need to be included concurrently

in reading instruction for this population (Sticht cited in Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986). Furthermore, the communication of meaning to an audience needs to be emphasized before the mechanics of spelling, punctuation, and grammar during writing instruction (see Whiteman, 1981). Research shows that what is valued most in job related writing is the ability to communicate, not perfect style, spelling or handwriting. Future studies should address the issue of teachers' and students' models of literacy; the findings would have serious implications for teacher training and curriculum development.

Many of these adult learners had very practical reasons for wanting to perform literacy tasks better and it needs to be noted that all of these tasks presuppose the meaningful use of language. One woman told of the difficulty she has writing notes to the teacher when her daughter is absent from school. A man in his mid-fifties yearns to "learn how to read on a good level so I really could understand what's goin' on in the world." Another man simply wants to be able to "write love letters to my wife" who travels frequently on business. Indeed, the difficulties of travel for non- or semi-literates was brought up by five respondents. One forty-two year old woman said she "wants to travel and read signs in getting around the city. Now I memorize streets or the number of stops (on the subway)." Two of those interviewed saw themselves getting around in a car and wanted to learn to read well enough to pass the drivers' test.

Besides these reading concerns, many people interviewed

mentioned math skills as a priority. One twenty-seven year old told of being short changed at a store and having it pointed out to him by his mother.

The adults interviewed in this study brought up a factor germane to literacy, one presently found at the forefront of many literacy studies, that is, the relationship of oral language to literacy learning. A report on the literacy of young adults has recently been published by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986). A low to moderate, yet statistically significant relationship (.33 to .38) was found between devised oral language tasks and literacy proficiency scales.

It was apparent in the interviews done in this study that some students found that expressing themselves clearly was difficult and, at times, a perceived impediment. Seven of the respondents voiced their concerns about language use. One woman seemed to realize that her linguistic community functioned in a discourse quite different from the one she was encountering in books. "I can't figure out the words because the words aren't used very often or the people around don't use them very often. People don't use their vocabulary." A young man with aspirations of being a minister saw a need to "know how to speak and say the proper things." This difficulty with oral language production is exemplified and emotionally expressed by a fifty-seven year old man: "I like to talk to people about racism...you do meet people and you want to explain yourself...you want to talk about

things...solve problems...ask questions about why things happen, why people try and kill each other. And you want to be able to pinpoint some ways to solve the problems." Here, through the language, it is apparent that this man can say what he means but it seems that his goal is to say more precisely, more eloquently, what he means in a different discourse style (Gee, 1987).

The implications of this realization, that literacy learning is dependent on linguistic factors, is succinctly summarized by Thomas G. Sticht in the foreword of the previously mentioned NAEP report (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986). He states that "rapid and dramatic improvement" cannot be promised to those who struggle with oral language production. Based on the complexity of the cognitive tasks at issue here, he proposes that "much longer periods of intervention are needed to make significant improvements in both the language and the literacy skills of the least literate in the nation" (p. vii). James Gee (1987) posits that the language learning difficulty stems from the fact that many of these adults are coping with new "discourses" with which they are not familiar. He makes the distinction between acquisition and learning and suggests that to learn a new "discourse" involves immersion, not dissimilar to the acquisition of a second language, as compared with a more behaviorist view of learning as training.

Some learners have a specific literature in mind when they enter the program. Ten people mentioned the Bible, four the newspaper and one referred to John Steinbeck's The Pearl. Four

could envision their literacy skills progressing to the point where college might become a reality. It is clear that little is known about the variety of materials that this adult population wants to learn to read and how the ideas and information in these materials might affect their lives.

Finally, initially unforeseen goals may have developed as the learners became more comfortable within the context of their literacy centers themselves. For some it provided a place to be. Two women referred to the site as an alternative to sitting at home. Adding to that sentiment, one went on to say, "At least I'm learning. Whether I get a job or not, at least I'm learning and that's the most important thing." The emotional support provided by the teachers and fellow learners in these programs also translates into a secondary goal. In dealing with studies of effective instruction, many researchers have investigated various social learning models. Balmuth (1986) contends that Darling's research clearly underscores the value of group interaction both for learning and for socialization. Several British researchers (Britton, 1970; Barnes, 1976) also underscore the importance of group work to allow for the articulation of thought, emotional support, and social interaction which facilitate learning. A bit of the social flavor of one center was discussed by a forty-three year old man. He speaks of his center's monthly "Red Letter Day". "The class gets together and tries to talk about their feelings. People bring food also."

RESEARCH QUESTION 4:

What factors are possible influences on attendance and/or drop-out rates?

Probably the most difficult decision made by these adult learners was the one to show up for the first session. This population had clearly made this commitment. As previously discussed, a tremendous amount of courage needed to be mustered to enter the doors of a literacy center. And, although many of the adults interviewed for this study proceeded with the support of family and friends, they went to their first session alone. Many researchers have pointed to the crucial nature of the initial meeting in determining whether or not participation will be continued. Bock goes so far as to state, "This is the stage when many under-educated participants drop out... and it calls for assurance that the first class session will be a positive experience" (1980, p. 127).

All of the people interviewed for this study made it past that first session. Constrained by the selection procedures of the study, the length of attendance ranges from six months to a year and a half. The researchers in this study have inferred, therefore, that there were some factors, both personal and inherent to the program, that affected the students' continuation.

One measure of commitment to a program could be reflected in attendance records. However, since the purpose of this study was to gain information about the learners through their own points

of view, official attendance records were not requested. Based on the assumption that at some point in time students were absent from classes, the question was asked about reasons for absences. Even though only three respondents emphasized that they had attended almost every session, the interviewers saw a persistence and determination to continue and felt that the reasons given for students' absences did not fall outside the realm of excuses one is likely to hear in school or the workplace. Most students explained absences by citing personal health problems, a variety of family-related issues such as child care and legal matters, and job conflicts. These reasons are in line with those noted in previous research studies. Beyond these issues, two said that they could not always afford carfare to get to the center while two males voiced frustration with either the program or their own lack of progress as reasons for not consistently attending.

Subjects were also asked whether they had ever attended another literacy program and, if so, what their reasons were for discontinuing. Here too, personal reasons were their dominant rationales. Fifteen respondents said that they had previously been enrolled in adult education programs, and five had attended vocational training programs. Three faulted the programs and characterized them as being insensitive or educationally ineffective. But the remainder mentioned moving, child care issues, and financial reasons. One fifty-seven year old woman told of having attended a program where she was learning, among other things, to type and sew. She had heard of this program

through a friend and evidently qualified for participation. However, when her public assistance center learned that she was attending they objected because she was only spending twenty hours a week at the center. They placed her in a public service position that required more hours. Because she did not like that program, she obtained a note from her doctor stating her inability to participate. After that she did not return to her other program.

Since the students' outside lives and personal commitments seem to pose the greatest obstacle to attendance, the questions that arise here would best be taken up with program directors: What provision does the program make to compensate for missed instruction during a student's absence? In particular, does the center provide child care facilities or support services to help students minimize time spent on personal problems? Also, what do program directors do to discourage unnecessary absences?

Previous research stresses the importance of discussing attendance expectations with students at the initial interview. Efforts need to be made to put this activity into its proper perspective; while a commitment is required, feelings of guilt should be assuaged when outside responsibilities, by necessity, supersede. In addition, if the learner perceives that sessions are meaningful and productive, some activities that might pose a conflict to attendance might lose their appeal (Newman, 1981).

It is almost impossible to conceive of any adult learner wanting to continue without the support and encouragement of the

people significant in his or her life (See Table VII). Family support may exist, as it did for almost every person in this study, but the support of friends and employers could be equally vital.

TABLE VII

Major Factors Positively Affecting Attendance

FACTOR	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Family Support	25
Perceived Progress	23
Heightened Self-Esteem	20
"Good" Teacher	18

Many of these people told of the burden of isolation felt when they tried "going it alone", keeping their lack of literacy a secret. One thirty-two year old man describes how he felt. "When I got out there on the street and I had to meet other people and they knew how to read and write and I knew I didn't, but they didn't know it, that's when it really hurts." This burden of secrecy was sometimes carried into the first session. A thirty-two year old woman reports that she initially told no one what she intended to do. However, after the first session, "I felt pretty good. After I did it, I went and told everybody." However, even with the support of family and friends, which was

mentioned by an overwhelming majority of respondents, the pain can continue. A thirty-three year old man has the support, both moral and pragmatic, of his mother and son but says, "Sometimes I get upset with myself when I ask him (the son, for help)...because it hurts to ask him to help me - even my mother. It hurts for a thirty-two year old man to go to a woman to ask for help." It would be unrealistic to think that participation in a literacy program will be able to change behaviors long cultivated. The pattern of hiding one's lack of abilities can carry into the center itself as exemplified by two students. A forty-four year old woman offered to pay her friend's granddaughter to tutor her in math so she "wouldn't be embarrassed in class." Another commented that she used the "homework hotline" set up for her child by the local elementary school. A fifty-three year old man confided to the interviewer that he keeps the fact that he cannot read every word a secret from his instructor. There may need to be additional tutorial support services to help students with homework, perhaps modeled after the homework hotline, or scheduled hours for a walk-in tutoring service.

Only two people told of a lack of outside support. One was a woman with a history of mental health problems who described herself as isolated. The other was a sixty-four year old woman whose family, with the exception of a daughter who shared a literacy problem, could not see the need for literacy instruction and whose friends thought she was too old to be concerned with

obtaining her GED. She commented, "Most of them are graduates from high school. They have it on me."

In discussing the issue of remaining in the program, the primary motivation cannot be discounted. Although goals were dealt with in the last section, it should be emphasized here that while seven adults said that they entered the program for a family member, usually a child, 25 said they did it for themselves. Two people summed it up by saying, "You've gotta understand that people gotta want to read. If they don't want to you can't teach them nothing" and, "First you gotta do it for yourself." The emotional support to sustain their initial effort then appears to be a combination of this newfound self-motivation and the encouragement and assistance of family and friends. Added to that, and also cited by many of the respondents, is the knowledge gained when arriving at the center for the first time. They see others like themselves and realize, possibly for the first time, that they are not alone.

The role the teacher or tutor in an ABE program plays in affecting the attitude of the learner seems unique and often central to the experience. Balmuth recognizes this phenomenon by stating,

> I have come to believe that while teaching has some elements of both science and art, it is most essentially a relationship. In ABE especially, while there is value in scientifically-based ordering of the learning environment and in creativity in devising ways to meet a need that arise, it is the display of respect and confidence characteristic of sound relationships that is truly crucial (1986, pp. 23-24).

And no relationship will be more crucial than that between teacher and learner. This very idea was expressed by a thirty-three year old man in this study. "In order for a person to really learn, he has to know his tutor and be comfortable with that person...have a relationship."

Balmuth enumerates four characteristics of effective teachers peculiar to adult basic education. The first involves encouragement and support. Newman states, "Adult learners require more reassurance than do children when learning to read" (Taylor, Wade, Jackson, Blum and Gold 1980, p. 95). Darkenwald (1986) mentions that "helpfulness" is one of the best predictors of perceived effective teaching. The second characteristic is sensitivity and compassion. Taylor, Wade, Jackson, Blum and Gold (1980), point out that this factor is often the one that distinguishes the adult program from the learner's prior educational experiences which so often have been rejected as unsatisfactory. Good teaching, defined as the teacher's ability to explain things well, is the third criterion and a perceived enthusiasm about reading is the fourth most-cited attribute.

Eighteen participants in this study mentioned their teachers as competent and caring (See Table VII). One of these eighteen respondents used the word "encouraging". She commented that the teacher was "very encouraging. When you do well here they tell you." Eight students noted the sensitivity of their teachers. A thirty-one year old female said, "Yes my teacher's real interested and steady. I like him because he's not hard with

you, he understands. If you don't know a word or you have a problem...he don't say that you're dumb or stupid or intelligent. He helps you." A forty-three year old man relates his teacher's understanding. "She calms the students down by confronting their fear. She taught us how to work together. She's the best teacher I ever had."

Some of the teachers referred to in this study fit into Balmuth's "good teacher" category inasmuch as they give their students activities or tactics they can understand. One respondent said, "My teacher. She does keep pushing us, drilling - she gives us something to hold on to." Another person is more specific in what that something is: "Ms. X gives you the rules and if you work on the rules and concentrate and you come up with the right answer."

It needs to be emphasized here that this "good teacher" category is determined by the perception of the adult learners and not on the basis of any professional, pedagogical standards. Whether drilling is the best means of instruction or whether the "rules" are appropriate for all situations is irrelevant here. What is of interest is the students' belief in doing what the teacher tells them is the secret to success. This points to the need to have knowledgeable teachers who are familiar with the most current information about literacy teaching and learning.

None of these interviewees mention any teachers or tutors who display enthusiasm about reading; none talk about ever having seen their teacher read. In other words, it seems that no one is

modeling reading behavior for these adult learners. This issue is one current among educators today. Recent research (e.g. Holdaway, 1979; Smith-Burke & Ringler, 1986) has emphasized the importance of demonstrating reading behaviors to those learning to read to help build familiarity with the language of texts and the purposes for reading (and writing).

Also, integrated or whole language as contrasted with isolated skills models of reading are gaining recognition as teachers and researchers continue to explore the relationship between reading, writing, and oral language acquisition. When Balmuth searched through the data on instructional factors, she found that

> Not only is there often no name or description of the method or methods used (perhaps because there was no method mandated), but even where one is named, there is rarely a description of the efforts made to insure that it is being carried out according to design so that successful methods could be replicated (1986, pp. 17-18).

Future studies with adult populations would do well to concentrate on accurate, detailed description and evaluation of literacy instruction and learning.

Most of the suggestions for program improvement centered on the learners having more input into what goes on at the centers. Nine comments addressed issues of curriculum and organization: more class time, smaller classes, more opportunities for student interaction, homogeneous groups. Three saw the need for students to study topics of personal interest to them, while one protested

the impersonal and ineffective "reading labs" where machines are supposed to do the teaching. Child care facilities were requested by a few women. Six persons in the same center felt their facility was a drawback. Their classes met on the stage of a high school auditorium. Other day students evidently had access to the auditorium during the day and, according to one source "they come through here, they curse and holler." Poor lighting and lack of heat were also mentioned by people at this center.

However, these suggestions for improvements seemed to be made tentatively and when looking back through the interviews almost all had cited the respect and admiration they had for their teachers. Three respondents felt that more teachers were needed; one thought they deserved more pay "because you have to have a lot of patience to sit down and work with someone (an adult) with a first grade education." As an afterthought he added that they should be given more vacations, too.

It logically follows that adults will tend to remain in programs if they feel their needs are being met and if they are able to see themselves progressing. Here again, this interview probed for the students' perceptions of progress rather than any standard criteria established by the educational community. In fact, it is interesting to note that no one mentioned grade equivalent scores as a measure of progress. However, tests did come up. A twenty-seven year old woman was unable to report any progress because she had been given "no tests or anything". Two

others gauged progress by the increased number of items correct on tests or homework assignments. The majority, seven in all, simply said that they knew more words. One specified that she "can read the months of the year, spell them, and know them when I see them". Other respondents saw themselves as having entered the private world of the literate community. One boasted of his ability to write using "cursive", another could write a "grammatical" sentence, but others were confused with the vocabulary of this previously secret club.

One thirty-two year old woman said that she could now read the way her teacher had taught her. "She showed us the syllables like a-e-i-o-u, then she showed us the synonyms. I keep breakin' it down. Then count the syllables and then look up the word". Here the terminology is confused and inaccurate. These strategies also take the student away from the text and interrupt comprehension. A forty-three year old male's progress was self witnessed by his ability to read the entire twenty-third Psalm. However, when asked to describe his overall reading ability he said, "Bad, bad. Can't sound out words. It's so hard. Like three words putting into one like im-por-tant. Sometimes I can't do that". In this case the concepts of words and syllables are confused and will, no doubt, further confound the reading process. These kinds of responses underscore the importance of integrating the decoding process with comprehension.

These two cases point to a need for adult educators to survey adults' knowledge of metalinguistic terms such as word,

syllable, sound, sentence, and grammar and if these terms are used during instruction, to make sure that they are understood accurately. Also, it seems from these comments that these two adults may have a limited sequence of strategies and may not have learned other strategies which would disrupt the comprehension process less. As Johnston (1985) argues, future research should include in-depth case studies of adults documenting their literacy learning over time. Three related questions must be asked: 1) do adult tutors and teachers understand the role of prior knowledge in word recognition and comprehension; 2) how familiar are they with word recognition and comprehension strategies which differ in the amount they disrupt comprehension; and, 3) do they teach the flexible use of these strategies (see Brown, Bransford, Ferrara and Campione, 1983 for a discussion of these issues). Further research is needed to answer these questions.

Parenthetically, much of the ABE research on instruction has emphasized the importance of practice, reinforcement, and measurement of newly formed concepts for the beginning reader yet only twice did participants in this study discuss homework. One person, mentioned earlier, checked his progress by noting a reduction in homework corrections and another considered the lack of homework as one of the drawbacks of his program.

Four other students assessed their individual progress by the fact they could read practical material better: newspapers, signs, and menus. One woman, for the first time, attempted to

help her children with their homework. Finally, on a more abstract level, one mentioned feeling more relaxed while another said he could think more clearly.

Many of the measures of progress reflected their ultimate goals. As stated in response to Research Question #3, the GED and specific jobs were high priorities. But almost a quarter of the population cited independence as their final goal. As stated by a thirty-three year old male,

> It's painful when you can't do something on your own when you want to do it. It's hard in life... it destroys people. I had to make a stand to push myself - even now... I can't get a job because I wasn't able to fill out applications, couldn't pass a simple test ... hard to travel ... I want to do things on my own.

A thirty-one year old woman shares this goal. She said that her goal would be reached "when I can say I don't need anybody to help me."

This newfound sense of independence and the feeling, as one woman puts it, that "you have a future" translates into self-esteem. A sixty-five year old man movingly describes his struggle to find his niche in a world seemingly indifferent to his existence. He says that over the years he had repeatedly asked his doctor if he was retarded because of his inability to read. "Sometimes I think I was retarded and no one paid any attention to me". He continues to attend his literacy program because, for the first time, people are attesting to the fact that he can learn. Others spoke of "shock and surprise" when

they realized they were capable of learning. This heightened self-image serves not only as the stimulus to keep these adult learners returning to their programs but also gives them the confidence needed to participate in the social contexts of their lives. A thirty-two year old man credits the program for giving him an active part in his family life. The society of the learning center has also contributed to reentry into the world at large. "I feel differently knowing that I'm learning to read again," says a thirty-seven year old woman, "I'm starting to trust a few people".

Many of the adults interviewed talk about the success they have experienced, some of it undoubtedly actual, some of it perceived, but no less true in its consequences. However, it is inevitable that along the road of learning they will also encounter struggles and sometimes failure. Will they be able to cope? It would be helpful to know more about the nature of these road blocks and how individuals break through them. One thirty-five year old woman has a new belief in herself: "I feel that now I'm doing what I want to do. And if I fail, I'll just come back and try it again".

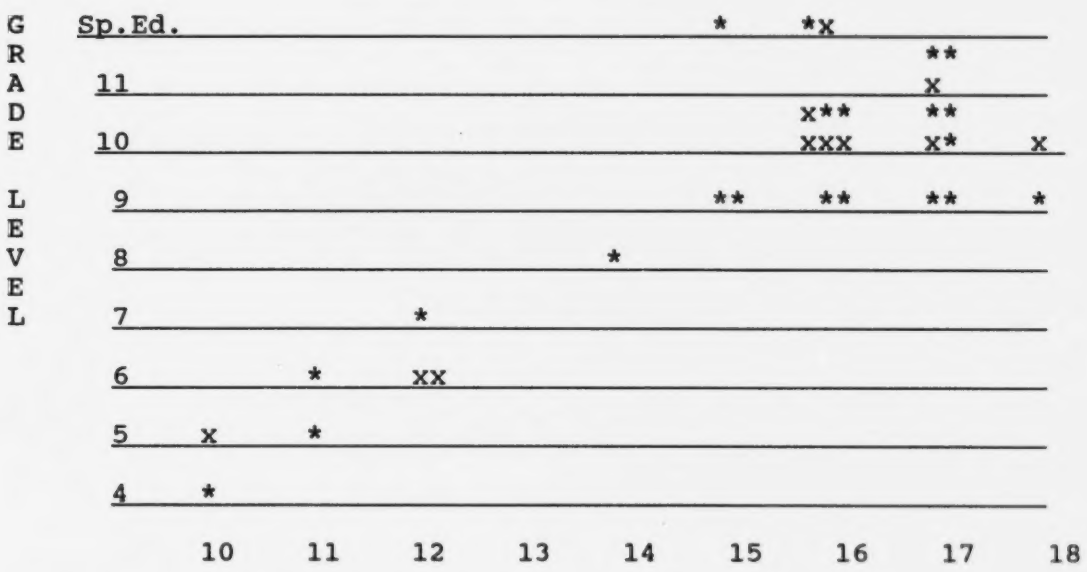
RESEARCH QUESTION 5:

What is the educational background of the participants? How does this history relate to the participants' current educational status?

All thirty-two people in this study dropped out of school. All had once been part of the American educational system and had access to the equal educational opportunities that we as a people so often boast of. However, all dropped out, one as early as fourth grade, but most remaining in school until high school or through their later teen-age years without having attained a high school diploma (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Age of Drop Outs by Grade Level (N=32)



* = reported age and grade level
x = approximated age/grade level

Figure 1 provides information concerning when these subjects left school but also gives a few clues as to why these adults may have left. It is evident from Figure 1 that by the time these students reached high school, many were older than their classmates. One female in her thirties said that she spent three years in ninth grade. However, she stated that it was not her retentions that had discouraged her; rather, she told of a guidance counselor who talked with her mother and sister and told them that she should not be in that school. After attempting ninth grade in another school she wound up in an adult education program. "I enjoyed being in school", she said. "They didn't enjoy me though."

These drop out data can be examined in terms of the geographic location of schooling to yield further insight (See Figures 2 and 3). These figures indicate that 91% (or 21 of 23) of the participants who attended school in the North, primarily in New York City, stayed in school into high school while 67% (or 6 of 9) of those educated in the South failed to reach high school. In addition, 17 out of 23 of the Northern-educated adults are now <u>under</u> forty years old as opposed to the 8 out of 9 Southern-educated who are now <u>over</u> forty. These findings are reflective of Fingeret's findings (1985). Factors such as the non-prioritizing of education in agrarian societies, the absence or lack of enforcement of compulsory education laws, and the migratory character of some families might explain why these Southerners left school earlier than their northern counterparts.

FIGURE 2

Age of Drop Outs by Grade Level and Geographic Origin (N=23)
(For those who attended Northern Schools)

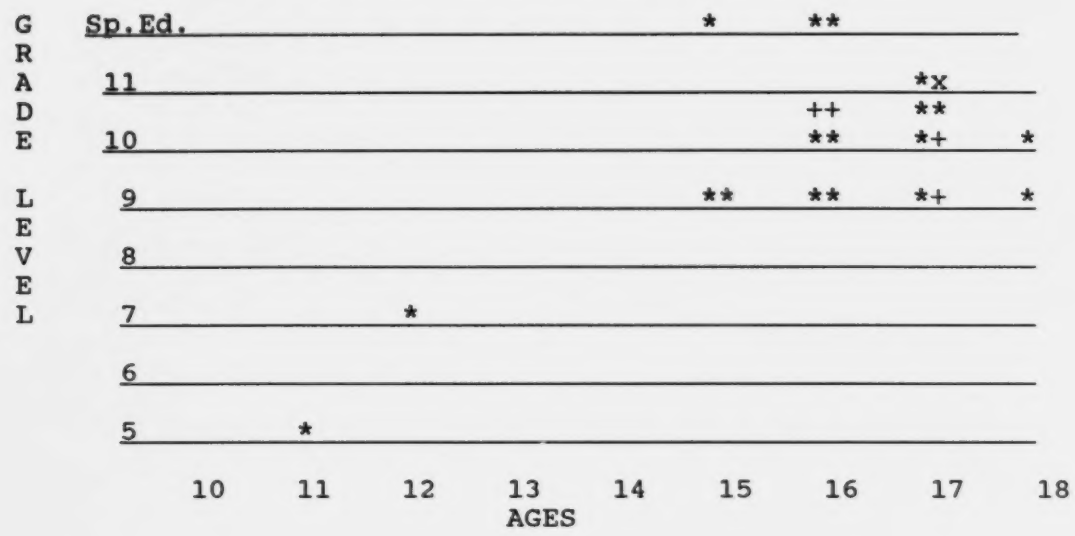
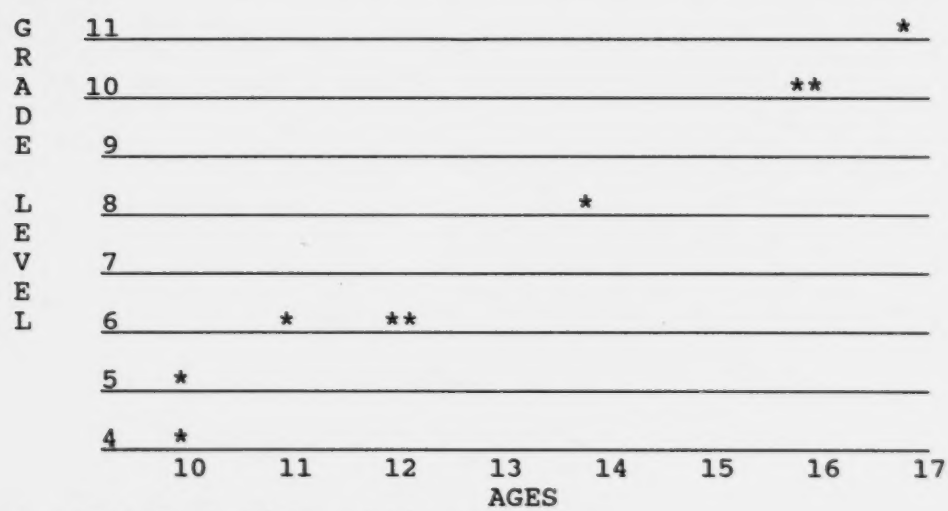


FIGURE 3

Age of Drop Outs by Grade Level and Geographic Origin (N=9)
(for those who attended Southern Schools)



* = New York City public schools
\+ = began in Southern schools/finished in New York City
x = other urban public school system

With the when and where established, the next question would be: why did students drop out of school? Essentially, two broad-based categories were discerned in these responses: school-related reasons and personal reasons. Altogether, respondents cited fifty-six reasons for dropping out of school: 38 related to the school, 18 to factors beyond school. Within these groupings more specific breakdowns exist. (See Table VIII).

TABLE VIII

Reasons for Dropping Out of School (N=32)

SCHOOL-RELATED REASONS	
Failed to achieve basic skills/failed subjects	12
Insensitive teachers or administrators	6
Attendance problems	3
Peer group pressure	5
Peer group ridicule	9
Concern for personal safety	3
PERSONAL REASONS	
Need or desire to work	12
Family problems	1
Pregnancy	5

A further breakdown by age groups reveals certain trends. For example, 22% or 4 of the group under forty (n=18) mentioned teacher insensitivity as reasons for leaving school; two of these four were enrolled in special education classes. In the over 40 group (n=14), 14% or two respondents, faulted teachers. Combining both groups it is noted that all attended New York City public schools exclusively.

The under-forty group also cited more peer-related causes. They outproportioned their older counterparts with regard to:

Peer pressure	4 to 1
Peer ridicule/teasing	6 to 3
Safety concerns	2 to 1

Again, a closer look at these numbers reveals that six out of the nine who spoke of being victims of verbal derision in school were educated through the New York City system and that three attended special classes. All who cited concerns about personal safety as factors in their decision to leave, attended New York City schools.

Personal reasons also divide along age lines. All five respondents who left because of a pregnancy are now in their thirties. Only one person, a male, from that age group said that he left school in order to work. The remaining eleven who left to work were all over forty, with the total number of females outnumbering males by one.

The reason for leaving school is not usually based on one factor nor does it hinge on one event. Most of these respondents cited more than one cause for discontinuing school. Often, however, the decision to leave seems to occur at the end of a period during which time the person has developed an increasingly negative perspective towards school.

It is difficult to imagine children not enjoying the early years of school. Once the discomfort of leaving the familiar

years of school. Once the discomfort of leaving the familiar environment of home has worn off, children tend to enjoy their learning at school. But what happens when learning is not imminent? One might expect increased frustration, and without appropriate intervention, a change of perspective could very likely take place, transforming the positive into negative. This pattern could make dropping out understandable, yet only three of the thirty-two participants in this study described their experience in these terms. Initially school was "liked", "enjoyed", seen as "good" by these three people; but afterwards realizations were voiced: "I wasn't a quick learner;" "The other students were more far ahead of me;" "When I was in high school I didn't understand it." Remembrances of the later days of school for some were far from positive: "I started hiding, made pretend I could do it. I blundered through eighth grade"; "Why should I go if I'm gonna fail?"; "I was happy to leave school".

One quarter of all respondents (8 out of 32) could remember nothing positive about school. One twenty-seven year old female said that she attended "good schools in white areas" but she remembered "bad teachers who would yell." She said that she realized in sixth grade that she could not comprehend the work but that there was no one to help. By tenth grade "I didn't want to leave school but I did because I didn't get too much out of it." Another woman in her twenties who left school in the fifth grade recalled,

> School was a bad experience. When I didn't know how to read a book in school I'd try to tell my teacher but she didn't listen to me. I used to play in the classroom 'cause the teacher wouldn't help me. I'd bother them and the kids a lot.

Problems started on day one for another woman now in her thirties:

> Down South in kindergarten, about six or seven, I had a bad experience with my teacher. She didn't like me because she said I had a heavy voice. I didn't like her.

Again, one quarter of the respondents remembered teachers in a negative light. In general they were perceived as indifferent. They "didn't listen," "knew (that learning problems existed) but never took the time," "passed you on," "didn't explain," "didn't care." One thirty-one year old woman recalls a sad episode:

> In P.S.---, in sixth grade, I wrote a lot...poetry, stories, diary. I gave it to the teacher. They were never returned and nothing was said. This hurt my feelings. I stopped writing after this but I always think about this experience.

Again, indifference is palpable in this quote by a forty-three year old woman:

> Teachers didn't care. I couldn't read. At tests, I knew words but couldn't read a book. I hid in my seat then they didn't call on me. If only one teacher would have noticed what was happening.

There are some apathetic and, using the word provided by one of the respondents, "bad" teachers, but other factors might be operating too. Schwarz (1979) proposes that a sociolinguistic mismatch might account for what could be perceived as teacher insensitivity and/or student reluctance to ask for assistance. In many of this country's urban centers, the student population and the teaching corps come from divergent communities and operate within different discourse systems. Under these circumstances, many students are unable to employ strategies that will communicate their difficulties. In keeping with Schwarz's conclusions it might also be hypothesized that teachers may also lack the sociolinguistic versatility necessary to be sensitive to multicultural needs. One forty-three year old man who related a history of family problems understood this mismatch.

> Teachers thought I was ignoring them. They tried to help but couldn't get through. I was too embarrassed, felt like I was being left behind. School became my worst enemy. I couldn't wait to get out.

About one-third of all respondents (n=10) could pinpoint the time when their literacy problem became evident to them (See Table IX).

TABLE IX

Grade When Reading Difficulty Became Apparent to Learner (N=10)

GRADE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS
4	1
5	2
6	3
7	3
8	1

It is ironic and extremely unfortunate that the professionals who dealt with these students could only diagnose and place three of them into appropriate special classes.

All told, eight of the thirty-two respondents in this study received special services in the public schools of New York City. Two were enrolled in designated special education classes, three were provided with extra help in reading and writing, and one was enrolled in a 600 school for disciplinary problems. All six are now in their thirties. The two remaining respondents who received special services were over forty and mentioned having been in speech therapy classes.

Placement in the special education class did attest to the fact that school officials were cognizant of the student's specific learning problem; however, in one case, the special class was perceived as doing more harm than good.

> I went to school in Brooklyn, P.S.---, a special class. That's what made me quit school. Back then they had a name for slow people like me, dealing with the kids in the neighborhood. I was separated from normal classes; it was frustrating. Everyone knew I was stupid. I was about ten or eleven. It made you give up hope totally. It was helping but you weren't with your friends. You was a dummy. It was bad. Made you want to drop out of school unless you had will power.

Certainly the impact of peer pressure cannot be overlooked as a contributing factor to school drop out rates. Ten of these respondents felt teased, ostracized, or victimized by their contemporaries. Five admitted that they preferred "hanging out" to attending classes and a few followed their friends right out the schoolhouse door.

Still, one of the most-cited reasons for leaving school was failure. Johnston's (1985) case study analysis of adult disabled readers stresses and reaffirms past studies (Dweck, 1985; Johnston & Winograd, 1983) which show that learning failure is often responded to in a helpless or passive way. Many of the respondents in this study attributed their failure to learn to themselves: "I never tried to get into it;" "I got to a certain school level I couldn't pass", were the responses of two women in their thirties. One man related, "When I found out my reading shot down I was ashamed to go to school."

All the same, and as indicated in these findings, failure and its resultant effects of perceived learning abilities should

not serve as the only causes of dropping out of school. Fingeret (1985) warns:

> Focusing on this narrow aspect ignores the larger nature of their (adult learners) experience of public schooling and encourages a purely psychological analysis of ABE students' relationship to their prior schooling. The data...suggest that schooling was alienating for a number of reasons, foremost among them the inability of the culture and structure of schools to respond to the concerns, pressures and life circumstances of individual students. (p. 54)

In fact, this population is not unlike the rural population studied by Fingeret inasmuch as they both "...have in common the experience of being alienated from the culture of the school as a result of some combination of personal attributes, family circumstances and the existing school norms and structures" (p. 51).

So far this discussion has centered on school-related reasons for students' quitting school. Perhaps that is because these are the issues that are being productively addressed. In New York City today, many programs exist which are designed to educate not only students, but also teachers, administrators, parents, and community leaders in ways of retaining young people in school and providing them with the literacy tools needed for successful interaction with today's world. Nonetheless, factors which extend beyond the school's boundaries were evident in this

study. Twelve respondents left school in order to work. However, only one of these was under forty and six lived in non-urban areas. Further studies of this nature might sample a larger population of ABE students in order to determine the extent to which employment still conflicts with education. These data indicate that it may not be a significant factor especially in urban areas.

The other non-school related cause for dropping out was pregnancy. Five woman, all now in their thirties, dropped out of high school as a result of pregnancy. Two mentioned that they had tried to return to school after giving birth. One had a positive experience in what she called the "young mothers school" she attended while pregnant. "They didn't have grades there. You took tests and whatever level you was at that's where you'd study. You'd study high school things and things on how to take care of your baby." But in her attempt to return she felt she could not contend with the bureaucracy of the system. "After I had the baby I tried to go back, but it was midterm week. First they wanted to take care of the other kids." The other woman who attempted to return found that she could not handle the responsibilities of being both a student and a mother. She lasted three months. At present, in spite of increased educational campaigns and increased availability of birth control, tne teenage birthrate has not declined. The situation worsens when the mother is only marginally literate. Continued and stepped-up efforts are needed to address the educational

aspects of this social problem.

The question still remains as to how these educational histories relate to the participants' current educational status. Today, all of these people are enrolled in adult education programs throughout the city. At present they appear to be satisfied with their progress and committed to attaining a certain degree of literacy, one that will enable them to advance within their chosen occupation and/or one that will allow them to enter the literate life of their family and community.

These thirty-two people were asked during the course of the interview if they had been previously enrolled in other adult literacy, basic education or vocational programs. Of the 29 who responded, 9 said that they had never done so. Of the remaining twenty, three spoke highly of their previous program but had discontinued: one had moved, another was pulled out by the public assistance authorities, and the last found her center closed. One person mentioned that this is her second round with this particular center while two others attend two programs concurrently. Ten, however, were quite critical of their other programs. The consensus was that they were too much like what they remembered of school: fast-paced and insensitive to individual problems. "They tell me I'm too stupid to learn", said a sixty-four year old man.

"You believe that?" asked the interviewer.

"No, I don't."

To summarize the educational status of those interviewed for this study it was found that:

- All attended elementary school.
- Twenty-four percent attended high school.
- All 32 dropped out of school.
- Presently all score between the 0.0 and the 4.9 grade level equivalents as measured by the tests administered at the outset of the programs.

In light of these facts, the following questions can be asked and issues raised:

1. What is the learning potential of this group?

Referring back to the data collected in Research Question #4, it is evident that the respondents believe they are learning and are, therefore, capable learners. At the time of the interviews, no one had been attending any one program for more than a year and a half; most were attending under a year. Whether or not standardized scores reflect progress remains to be seen. The appropriateness, and hence the validity, of these measures, however, comes into question. Most have built-in cultural biases and their use with adult populations has been questioned. Finally, the motivation that results from perceived progress can wane if progress is made slowly. Common-sense notions of literacy learning contend that adults learn faster than children. Some research refutes this belief. As Mikulecky

(1986) points out, referring to the findings of Sticht, it takes some 80 to 100 hours of instruction time to attain a single grade-level increase in reading. Adult learners, their instructors, and the public in general need to be apprised of these recent findings.

2. What kind of school-based support was available for these people?

Placing all of the blame on the schools would not only be unfair but it would also be simplistic. Yet, it is hard to deny that some blame lies with the school. Many of the current adult BE learners "slipped through the cracks" of a system probably too large to monitor its own operations effectively.

3. How did these adults surmount past educational experiences and enroll themselves into their present program?

There is a circularity evident here and the reader is referred back to Research Questions 1, 2, and 3. However, the essence of motivation is most likely attributable to a combination of realizing limitations, receiving moral support from family and friends, and a decision to take a risk. As stated by one of the female respondents:

> I'm doing something I always wanted to do. I have an opportunity. Now I'm taking advantage of it.

RESEARCH QUESTION 6:

<u>What are the significant events in the lives of the participants? How do these events relate to their current life and educational situations?</u>

Represented in the demographic data of this study is a major trend in American history which began after World War I and intensified after World war II: the migration of Blacks from South to North. This move was not only geographical but also sociological inasmuch as it constituted a shift from an agrarian and manufacturing economy to an expanded industrial and urbanized economy which stressed technology and services (Fingeret, 1985).

Patterns in the years of schooling of the adults in this study reflect the population shift from the South to the North. Three of the six respondents in their forties, four of the five respondents in their fifties, and one sixty-year old were educated in the South. All eight dropped out of school before they eventually moved to New York. Seven of this group grew up on farms and often had to help with picking crops and with daily chores. This life style had a price in terms of formal education. As one fifty-seven year old woman put it,

> ...Each morning I get up and see the school bus, other kids going to school, I used to cry. I held that against my grandfather for a long time because we had to farm and I couldn't understand why I couldn't go to school. (Interviewer: Did you miss a lot of grammar school?) Yes, on a rainy day we may be able to go to school, but on a nice clear day we had to work the farm. On a rainy day there was still chores to do....But they may have mercy on you and let you go to school. Maybe you'd go three days a week and stay home the other two.

Often families had to search for work, causing them to move from town to town in the South. A woman in her sixties recalled:

> ...What happened my father died when I was young. My mother had us all. Sometimes she was able to get a stable home for us. In Miami there wasn't any work for my mother. There was seasonal work, laundry work, you weren't able to make any money. My mother farmed on the Florida Keys. She paid for our keeps. If something went wrong, we weren't happy, we'd have to find someplace else.

This picture of southern farm life and schooling of most of the older participants contrasts with the pattern of life and education of the twenty- and thirty- year olds in the study (See Table X). All of the respondents in their twenties and 10 of the 15 respondents in their thirties lived in New York City and attended its public schools. Only three of the respondents in the thirty-year old range moved from the South to the North during their years of schooling. Additionally, one was educated in Chicago and one exclusively in the South.

TABLE X

Participants' Primary Location of Schooling by Age Group (N=32)

AGE	SOUTH ALONE	SOUTH AND NYC	NYC ALONE	OTHER	TOTAL
20-29	0	0	3	0	3
30-39	1	3	10	1	15
40-49	4	0	2	0	6
50-59	4	1	0	0	5
60+	1	0	2	0	3
Total	10	4	17	1	32

Another reflection of the northern migration is the fact that for 27 of the 32 students one or both of their parents, regardless of age, came primarily from southern states: Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia and Virginia. Even though many of these families lived in the North (n=17) the families were large (See Table IX), like farm families in the South, where children were needed to help with the work. Thirteen of these participants reported from seven to 14 children in the family, while 16 others listed from three to six children. Often the participants commented on how difficult it was for their parents to earn a living, particularly if it was a single parent, usually the mother. Sometimes this meant that these participants did not have what their peers considered "proper" school attire;

this was a source of great embarrassment. One sixty-four year old remembered:

> I had two dresses; one was on the line, one was on my back. Kids used to make fun of me. I was in the third grade. I went through school, I never had much clothes. I remember getting in fights about it. I had to come home every evening and wash my clothes.

TABLE XI

Family Size (N=32)

AGE OF PARTICIPANTS	NUMBER OF CHILDREN PER FAMILY							
	1-2	3-4	5-6	7-8	9-10	11-12	13-14	Total
20-29	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
30-39	1	6	4	3	0	0	1	15
40-49	1	2	0	2	0	0	1	6
50-59	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	5
60+	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	3
Total	3	11	5	8	1	2	2	32

At other times it was a matter of parents not having sufficient time: reactions to this differed. One thirty-two year old said without hostility, "Sometimes your parents didn't have no time." On the other hand, a fifty-seven year old male complained:

> ...see, your parents is not teaching you the meaning of education or why you're going to school and you just pay up when you get a certain age....(my parents) wasn't even concerned with my life, period... maybe this is sad because it got me.

In spite of the many hardships, fourteen of the 32 respondents lived in intact families while they were growing up (see Table XII).

TABLE XII

Previous Parental Structure

Primary Caretaker for Participants (N=32)

AGE OF PARTICIPANTS	RELATIVES	MOTHER ALONE	BOTH PARENTS	TOTAL
20-29	0	1	2	3
30-39	5	7	3	15
40-49	1	2	3	6
50-59	0	0	5	5
60+	1	1	1	3
Total	7	11	14	32

In most cases, the family environment included some reading materials. When asked what printed materials were available in their homes while growing up, respondents listed: newspapers, storybooks, schoolbooks, magazines, the Bible, religious

pamphlets, encyclopedias, catalogs, almanacs, Tarot cards, astrology books/materials, and letters. The Bible, newspapers and magazines were mentioned most frequently.

The comparison of the current family situations of the participants with their past experiences in terms of number of children and primary caretaker reveals demographic changes. Table XIII shows that current families are, on the average, much smaller. Thirteen participants reported having one or two children, while eight have none.

TABLE XIII

Current Family Size (N=32)

AGE OF PARTICIPANTS	NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN FAMILY				
	0	1-2	3-4	5-6	Total
20-29	2	1	0	0	3
30-39	2	5	6	2	15
40-49	2	2	1	1	6
50-59	2	2	1	0	5
60+	0	3	0	0	3
Total	8	13	8	3	32

Since all of these parent-respondents dropped out of school, one might ask how does their educational history affect their children's success? Results of this study reveal that most of the children of the participants in their twenties and thirties are still in school, that is, currently enrolled in pre-school,

elementary, secondary or post-secondary programs (See Table XIV). Only one child has dropped out of school. Perhaps the most encouraging finding is that 12 of the children of the 32 total study participants have graduated from high school; eight of these have continued on to college.

TABLE XIV

Current Educational Levels of Participants' Children (N=32)

AGE OF PART.	PRE SCHOOL	ELEM.	JHS	HS	DROP OUT	HS GRAD	SOME COLLEGE	COLLEGE & BEYOND
20-29	1							
30-39	4	19	6	7	1	1	1	
40-49		1			8		1	1
50-59				1	2		3	1
60+					1	3	1	
	-	--	-	-	--	-	-	-
Total	5	20	6	8	12	4	6	2

Checking the homework of a child can be a traumatic experience for a parent who cannot read or write with surety. However, the newly gained sense of power in literacy acquired by these participants changes that situation. Those students in the thirty-year old range frequently mentioned spending time with their children on their schoolwork. One woman stated that she disliked being "duped" by her children, something that no longer happens with her newly acquired reading skills from her program.

> ...Well sometimes my kids come from school and say they don't have homework and I check their homework and they haven't did it. Or they made something up, guessing, before I couldn't do it. But now...

Another woman added, "it helps them...sometimes we sit down and read books together...their books from school with little stories in them." Several in this age group also mentioned going to school in order to become role models for their children - a finding which supports Fingeret's (1985) findings. One mother reported that her children are a little "slow" in reading but that they say, "If Mama can do it I can do it too." One father explained,

> He's (his son) glad that I'm going to school and I'm trying to get my life together... think it helps him because when he sees an adult going to school it pushes him on because I explain to him about not having an education...I let him see my friends and things that cause people to get locked up.

One mother summarized her strong feelings about education, "Long as you live in my house you going to school!"

Perhaps this group is a self-selected, hence atypical representation, since they all attend adult programs. But hopefully their interest, concern and time spent with their children will prevent the high drop out rate from carrying over into this next generation. Future research should track the educational progress of children whose parents attend literacy

programs to try to ascertain if program participation does, in fact, have an influence on the children as well as the parents.

Another demographic change has to do with family structure. Although not an overwhelming change, the number of single mothers in the thirty-year old range as reported in Table XV is greater than that of the previous generation reported in Table XII. Since we have only partial data on the employment status of the parents of the participants, it is impossible to make comparisons. However, of the nine single mothers in their thirties, not one currently holds a job. If the pattern of single parenting, coupled with unemployment, continues to increase, programs may need to provide more support services for this group if they are to attend ABE programs on a regular basis.

TABLE XV

Current Parental Structure

Participants as Primary/Joint Caretaker (N=24)

AGE OF PARTICIPANTS	FATHER ALONE	MOTHER ALONE	BOTH PARENTS	TOTAL
20-29	0	0	1	1
30-39	1	9	3	13
40-49	0	2	2	4
50-59	0	0	3	3
60+	0	1	2	3
Total	1	12	11	24

Lester Thurow (1987) in a recent article, "A Surge in Inequality," notes that "the rich are getting richer, the poor are increasing in number, and the middle class has trouble holding its own." (p.30) He also points out that the increase in inequality in the distribution of earnings has resulted from increased foreign competition and an increase in the number of women in the work force. Unfortunately even though females are earning somewhat more than before, they still earn far less than men, and their earnings increase at a slower rate. He concludes that when most workers shift from manufacturing into service jobs, the result is usually a salary cut. The exceptions are minorities, women, and others who hold part-time or low-level jobs and for whom the shift may mean a small increase.

Sticht (1986) in his report, Cast-Off Youth, also points to the disheartening figures of minority unemployment, particularly for Black and Hispanic teenagers (42.7% and 23.7% respectively in 1985). He stresses the worsening position of youth as compared to adults and minority youth as compared with white.

The depressed employment statistics cited by Sticht are mirrored in this sample as well. Twenty-three of the 32 participants in this study are currently unemployed (See Table XVI for breakdown by age group).

TABLE XVI

Current Employment Status (N=32)

	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	
AGE OF PARTICIPANT	EMPLOYED	UNEMPLOYED
20-29	1	2
30-39	4	11
40-49	2	4
50-59	1	4
60+	1	2
Total	9	23

To obtain a better sense of the unemployed participants' employment record and skills, these adults were asked to describe their last job. Their work histories are reflected in Table XVII. Since some jobs lasted only a short time, some reported more than one job.

TABLE XVII

Unemployed Participants' Previous Employment (N=27)

AGE OF PART.	TYPE OF JOB* FAC-TORY	FOOD INDUSTRY	LABOR	OFF. JOB	SECU-RITY	HELP PROF.	FASHION	TOTAL
20-29	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	4
30-39	3	3	1	1	1	2	1	12
40-49	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
50-59	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	6
60+	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2
Total	7	6	4	3	1	4	2	27

*No responses obtained from 2 participants aged 30-39 and one aged 40-49.

One common assumption in adult basic education is that adults often have unrealistic ideas about future employment which are far beyond their skill level. These unemployed adults, when asked what future job they would like to hold, gave responses that were plausible. Most of the jobs respondents aspired to reflect a shift away from manual labor and manufacturing to the service professions. (See Table XVIII).

TABLE XVIII

Unemployed Participants' Future Job Aspirations

AGE OF PART.	PAST JOBS	FUTURE JOB
20-29		
	factory fast food labor	helping professions (with mental patients)
	cashier	physical therapist
30-39		
	laundry clerk	helping professions (children)
	factory	office work
	cashier	own office/office work
	fast food	office job beautician
	security	fix computers court officer
	(no response)	helping professions
	volunteer - administrative	helping professions (organizing non-profit agency)
	factory helping professions	own own business (body and fender shop)
	modeling	social worker in hospital
	construction	cooking or gardening
	(no response)	work in body and fender shop
40-49		
	seamstress	word processing post office
	(no response) food stand	computer operator

	factory	helping professions (abused children)
	farming	helping professions (nurse's aide)
50-59		
	labor	(no response)
	factory home attendent beautician typist	cook
	owned restaurant with wife	restaurant work
	labor	retire
60+		
	office	helping professions (children)
	Senior citizen companion	helping professions (AIDS babies)

It is interesting to note that six of these respondents were involved in community activities helping other people, usually involving a religious affiliation. Three of these six could forsee jobs in the helping professions. As Thurow (1987) indicated, for most of these respondents, a job in the helping professions might yield slightly increased earnings as compared with their past jobs.

The nine participants who are currently employed show less clear patterns between their current employment and their future aspirations (See Table XIX). Some of these shifts, if realized, could produce decreased earnings depending on the level of the future job.

TABLE XIX

Employed Participants' Current and Future Job Aspirations

AGE OF PART.	CURRENT POSITION	FUTURE JOB
20-29		
	home attendent	show biz working with people
30-39		
	nutritionist	nurse
	foreman	computers contractor
	NYC Housing Authority	police, fireman corrections officer
	maintenance	own restaurant
40-49		
	chauffeur	master mechanic
	assistant cook	same
50-59		
	cook/gal Friday	office
60+		
	factory	own business (beauty products)

One issue which is particularly relevant to this group is the finding discussed by both Sticht (1986) and Mikulecky (1986) that general literacy training is not particularly transferable, nor effective for job training. An approach which emphasizes instruction more directly related to potential jobs is far more successful in helping marginal adults obtain employment. To this end, Sticht (1987) has developed a workshop, the Functional Context Workshop, to train teachers of adults to use this approach.

Many of the adults in this study stated that their primary goal was to pass the GED or obtain a job, although some had somewhat more specific goals. However, most of the training they received was general literacy training. Since a majority of the participants listed getting a job as a primary goal, it might be helpful if these programs offered their participants alternatives to the global goals cited frequently. For example, program staff might help them define certain job domains for which they wish to train, and encourage them to spend time studying more information relevant to their goals.

Current adult literacy assessment is based on a general literacy model. The functional context orientation argues for a more flexible assessment system for adults based on relevant tasks to accomplish certain functions which can be, in turn, related to specific job types. Given an item bank, similar to the NAEP item bank, adult programs would be able to tailor

assessment to each individual and mark individual progress as well. Just as with the NAEP Assessment of Young Adults, a core of items could also be included for comparison purposes, if needed.

The group of adults in this study is an impressive group in that they have overcome incredible odds to walk into an adult center, to ask for help, and to remain with the arduous task of learning. Since many of them are interested in the "helping professions," it seems logical to ask some of them to volunteer to recruit others who are reluctant to take the risk. During the study some mentioned wanting eventually to be able to teach others after they have made progress. Would these ideas hold for other adults? In the end they need to be tried and evaluated through future research.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Recent research (Heath, 1986; McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1981; Scribner & Cole, 1981) stresses the importance of the functions of language and literacy and the social contexts in which they occur. "Perceived functional need" for literacy is a driving force in promoting the learning. In this study, this functional need seems to be a motivator for getting adults to consider going back to school. It might be as general as a belief that literacy is needed to get a job or as specific as learning to read the Bible or the driver's manual.

Our finding that many of the females learned about literacy programs through television and/or radio advertizing is important. If this finding is confirmed in other studies, it raises some important questions about the use of these media as a communication tool for adult learners. Which ads were particularly effective? Several participants said that they identified with the scenarios in the ads which often related to their "perceived functional need" for literacy (e.g. reading to a child). Which other scenarios, <u>from the point of view of adult learners,</u> might spur other adults to call and make an appointment at a center? Which programs were these adults listening to when they heard these ads? Is the sex of the listener related to program (and time)? Studies could be done to find out the

answers to these questions and then tested by varying the type of ad and whether it is designed to appeal to men and/or women and the scheduling. The answers to these questions would help the TV and radio networks design ads which might motivate the so-called "unreachable" adults who have not yet attended a literacy program.

However, a successful ad campaign is only useful if there are literacy programs to support them. The finding that many people were forced to wait to enter a program, coupled with the many comments that more teachers are needed in the existing programs is, at best, discouraging. Picture a young adult who is highly ambivalent about sharing his guilt and pain about not being able to read. He or she is told that there will be a one to three month wait to get into a program. Is the adult's motivation strong enough to last through the waiting period? This raises two major questions: How long do most adults have to wait? Are there adequate resources in terms of programs and trained teachers for this population of learners?

Another related issue surfaces, namely the need for a more extensive inter-agency network which would allow one agency without any more places to refer students to other agencies. Also, it might be used to transfer student records, such as testing results. This might mean that students who may be reluctant to try another center would not be confronted by yet another test when they arrive at the new agency.

Many of the adults in this study knew that they wanted to learn to read and write "to get a job" or "to pass the GED." Another question which needs to be pursued more fully is: what specific literacy skills do adults think are prerequisite for each of these goals? As Balmuth (1986) points out, many adults have unrealistic ideas about what is entailed in getting a GED which may lead them to drop out. If students were clearer about what the GED involves and how long it might take to attain this goal, perhaps they might opt for an intermediate range goal involving employment. Darkenwald (1986) mentions "Valentine's factor-analytic typology of specific literacy tasks required by low-literate adults. (p.65)" Since this report is unpublished, the question remains: which jobs does this typology cover? Given the illusiveness of transfer, the closer the literacy tasks in a given curriculum are to the requirements implied in the students' goals, the more likely the possibility for success. But first, literacy tasks in jobs that these students are likely to take and their related social contexts need to be described in detail. Then, curriculum can be designed with student goals in mind and can be tested against a more traditional curriculum which Mikulecky (1982) suggests does not reflect the demands of the working world.

In this study many students' concepts of reading and writing are limited to mechanics such as phonics, spelling, punctuation, and grammar as well as word for word accuracy. One might hypothesize that this may be the common pattern, since this

reflects the research findings on poor readers and writers during the public school years (Allington, 1983; Birnbaum, 1982). Further research needs to be done on the concepts of literacy held by these students, since these concepts drive learning and shape expectations. This could be all the more critical in light of the importance of teaching both phonics and comprehension in the earliest stages of adult instruction (Sticht in Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986) and the emphasis on the construction of meaning before editing in writing (Graves, 1983).

One other area of confusion for some adult beginning readers seems to be the metacognitive language about literacy, terms such as word, sound, sentence, phrase, consonant, vowel, long, short, syllable, prefix, root, and suffix. This is particularly interesting due to the fact that young beginning readers often have the same lack of knowledge (Holdaway, 1979) which can cause problems if teachers use the terms during instruction. There is very little research on adult <u>beginning</u> readers' understanding of these terms.

Balmuth (1986) and Darkenwald (1986) underscore the complexity of teaching adult literacy learners. From the results of this study one teacher is clearly respected and loved by her students. It is important to know more about successful teachers and their classrooms. Ethnographic studies of these professionals would provide description and allow generation of hypotheses about the factors such as interest, caring, "pushing," rules, drilling, and listening, mentioned by the students in this study.

The social climate of not only the classroom but also of the agency needs to be considered more fully. In this study the social times seemed to provide a chance to express and allay fears, to develop a sense of community (i.e. belonging) and to use the language of literacy (e.g. talking about current events). If James Gee is right, language, both oral and written, must be acquired through "use" not just talking about it. Social occasions provide a useful forum. Another question is generated by this study: to what extent are techniques from the current research on oral and written langauge acquisition reflected in these classrooms?

The overwhelming majority of the adults in this study owned the idea that they themselves must work to learn to read and write. What facilitated the development of this ownership and strong sense of determination to persevere? Because of this drive some were not satisfied with the academic support services provided at their center. Which kinds of support is most effective: additional tutoring, computer assisted instruction, a place for class members to study/discuss together, a tutorial "hotline"? These could all be systematically tested. In addition, the need for teachers to do on-going observation and adjust curriculum accordingly also needs to be monitored.

One final word about methodology. Originally this study was to have been a series of ethnographic interviews of adult beginning literacy learners. While the information which was obtained certainly has been of value in beginning to describe the

characteristics of this population, it is clear that a structured interview by a "stranger" has its limitations. Written questionnaires and telephone interviews, in our opinion, are even more suspect in terms of the quality of the data obtained. Most of the participants spoke of the "pain" and "hurt" associated with talking about their lack of literacy skills or having someone find out about them. Why should talking to a "stranger" conducting interviews be any different? The only reassuring finding was that a majority of these individuals said that they did not mind as long as the interview would help improve literacy programs. Nevertheless, this still does not mean that they readily volunteered personal or "painful" comments which might have proved informative.

Consequently in order to obtain data which will allow understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural factors impacting the lives of these individuals, a trust relationship developed over time with confidentiality guaranteed is a necessity. In creating this questionnaire, the researchers worked to develop questions which would not be too personal nor offend the participants. With a trust relationship some of this information might be available.

In addition, one problem which surfaced during the analysis and interpretation of the data was the need to obtain information from the agency (e.g. attendence rates) and from the teachers. An ethnography examining adults in the full context of their lives, at home, at school, and at work (if employed and if possible)

would lend a depth to the data which we were unable to attain (e.g. Fingeret, 1982). The hour interviews, however, have given us a preliminary data base from which to generate research hypotheses and select participants for an ethnographic study to begin in the fall. In addition, a revised version of the interview also will be generated based on these results.

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APPENDIX

ADULT LITERACY PROJECT
M. Trika Smith-Burke, Ed.D.
New York University
May, 1987 - FINAL DRAFT

Introduction

Introduce yourself - get to know person you are interviewing a little bit before starting.

I have some questions to ask you today. Even though I will be taking notes, I need to tape record our talk since I may not be able to get everything down. If you feel uncomfortable about the tape recorder, just let me know and I will turn it off. I want you to know that only our project staff will listen to the tapes. Everything you say is completely confidential. Your comments will only be used in such a way that no will be able to tell that you made them. Your comments will NOT be shared with the program staff here, unless you request it.

The purpose of this project is to get information that will help improve high school and adult programs in the city. We also want these programs to reach more people. To do this we would like to find out more about the people who are part of programs now. We need to know how people, like you, found out about programs. We also need to know what made you decide to attend and whether you are learning what you wanted to learn.

There are many people who have never thought about attending a program. Some don't think this kind of program would be useful. Some never find out about the programs. Some are embarrassed about the difficulty they have with reading and writing. And others can't attend because of the way programs are organized.

By understanding your educational and life experiences; by understanding what led you to attend the program, and your experiences in the program, we may be able to improve the program so that even more people can come here to improve their reading and writing.

At any time, if there is a question which you do not wish to answer, you do not have to. If you feel uncomfortable or don't want to comment, just tell me and we will go on. Also, if you don't understand a question, please say so and I will try to explain it better. We only have an hour to do this, so I may have to interupt at times to move on to the next question. Please try not to take this personally. Unfortunately we must finish in the time given us.

The questions are divided into three parts. The first part is about your current program; the second part is about your educational history and life situation and the final part is about your work.

We really appreciate your volunteering to help us in our project. We could not do this project without your support. You are the expert on this topic. Your comments will help us in trying to make programs more effective and more available. Do you have any questions, before we get started?

Fill in cover sheet on the participant

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANT _____

NAME OF PARTICIPANT _____

WHAT YEAR WERE YOU BORN?_____

NAME OF PROGRAM_____

WHEN DID YOU START THE PROGRAM (MONTH, YEAR)_____

_____DAY STUDENT _____ NIGHT STUDENT _____MALE _____FEMALE

_____ETHNIC BACKGROUND

ARE YOU A NATIVE SPEAKER OF ENGLISH? -----YES -----NO

(Ask only if you have a question about English fluency or dialect.)

*****WHAT LANGUAGE WAS SPOKEN IN YOUR HOME WHEN YOU WERE GROWING UP? _____

*****WHAT LANGUAGE IS SPOKEN IN YOUR HOME NOW?_____

DATE AND TIME OF INTERVIEW_____

_____

INTERVIEWER _____

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

1. How did you hear about the program?

2. What did you do to get into the program?
   Probe for the following:
   telephone call
   (were you asked to) fill out forms?
   interview
   tests (probe - what kind of test?)
   put on waiting list? how long did you wait?

   If needed - Was it difficult to get in? If so, how did you feel about it when you were trying to get in?

3. Did you tell anyone that you went back to school?
   (Probe for who: spouse, kids, friends, employers)

   If yes, how they feel about it?

4. How would you describe your reading and writing? What's easy for you to read and write? What things are hard to read and write?

   How would you describe your math? What's easy and what's hard?

5. Why did you decide to attend this program? What do you want to learn from it?

   a. If for a better job, what job?
      What kinds of skills are needed for that job?

   *****What difference do you think learning to read or write would make?

   b. If they want to learn for their children or "friend"

      Probe to see what they want to learn - reading? writing? math? something else?

   c. If they say for own benefit - probe to see what they mean by "own benefit" - What would you like to be able to do that you can't do now?

6. Are there times when you cannot come to class? If yes, what are some of the things which keep you from going?

   (If answer is general, probe for specifics - church, kids etc.)

   ***** Probe: If you have a problem (nonacademic), is there anyone in your program who can help you solve it? Who?

7. Is there anyone at school, at home, or in your community who you can ask for help with your school work if you need it? If yes, Who?

   It's not always easy to ask for help, how do you ask? How does it work for you?

8. Has anyone asked you about what YOU wanted to learn in this program?

   If yes, what did you say you say you wanted to learn? Are you learning it? How?

   If no, ask what does your program cover? (What are you studying?)

   (Probe: get a description of the kinds of subjects they are studying in the program/kinds of activities).

9. How do you know if you are making progress?

   How will you know when you have successfully finished your goal?

10. Do you see any differences in your life - any aspect of your life - since you began this program? Do you feel differently about yourself? How?

11. Have you ever been in another adult ed program in the past?

    If yes, find out about each experience.

    1) How did you hear about it? (for each program)?
    2) When was this?
    3) Where was this?
    4) How was this program different from the one you're in now?
    5) Did you get anything out of this program?
    6) Why did you stop attending this program?

12. Given your experience in <u>this</u> program, are there any things which you feel should be different or changed or added?

13. If you wanted to teach someone who wanted to read and write better, what would you teach them? (probe: what kinds of activities)

LIFE SITUATION

14. What part of the city do you live in now? How long have you lived there?

Where were you from originally?

Have you lived in any other places?

15. Where did your parents come from originally?

16. (If know already skip) - Do you live alone or with other folks?

17. Do you have children? How old are they? What grades are they in?

18. How do your children do at school? (Probe a bit: to describe successes or difficulties)

19. Do you ever talk to them about school? If yes, what do you talk to them about?

20. Do your children ever ask you about the program your in? If yes, what are they interested in ?

21. Reading and writing comes up in our personal lives many times. For example, I have to check TV guide to figure out what to watch, take telephone notes, read directions on medicine bottles or the rent agreement to name a few. Sometimes I do these alone - sometimes with a friend (my husband/wife)? Sometimes I even try to get someone else to do them.

    How is reading and writing used in your home? Do you do them by yourself? with someone? or do you get someone else to do some things?

    Sometimes these things are so much a part of our lives it's hard to be aware of them. Can you think of any other things? Bus schedules? reading and writing letters?

22. Are you involved in community activities? What are they? Probe: for example community center? church?

23. Are you ever asked to read and write during these activities? *****How do you deal with that?

PAST LIFE AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

24. Where did you go to school? (Be sure to elicit all schools the type of school and the place. If comfortable, probe a bit to get participant to describe experience.)

Were you in any special programs in school? If so, what was it like

25. When did you leave school? What grade were you in? How old were you then?

    Did you ever miss a long period of time in school? How old were you? What grade?

    Did you have any really good or bad experiences in school? If so, would you tell me about them? What grade were you in?

*****Do you remember if you realized that you could not read or write as well as the other students? When was this?

If left school before graduating....

What made you leave school?

Did you have any strong feelings about leaving school? What?

*****Did your parents/friends know that you had difficulty with reading and writing at that time? How did they know? If they didn't know, why not?

How did your family feel about your leaving school?

Your friends?

Did you ever try to go back to high school? If so, what was it like?

26. Did parents or the people who raised you work while you were in school? What did they do?

27. How far did they go in school?

28. How well do think they could read and write?

29. Did anyone in your household ever help you with your reading or writing? or other schoolwork? If so, how? (Try to elicit who is was)

30. What kinds of reading materials - books, newspapers, or pamphlets or other things - were in your home growing up?

31. How many brothers and sisters did you have? Younger? Older?

32. How well did they do in school? How far did they go in school?

If they had difficulty with school ask:
*****Did they ever have any difficulty with reading and writing?

33. Have any of them attended an adult education program?

If no, do you think they would like to? What do you think keeps them from going? Probe: knowing about programs, scheduling, feeling unsure whether the program would do anything for them)

If yes, which program? What did they want to learn?

34. What kind of jobs do they do now?

CURRENT JOB HISTORY

35. Do you have a job now?
If no, ask: What was your last job before this?
Are you trying to get a job now? If yes, what kind of work are you looking for?

36. Some jobs involve reading and writing although we don't always notice this - since the reading and writing become such an automatic part of the job - like reading directions, signs, or a list from a supervisor. Writing notes to yourself, or leaving messages for someone.

What reading and writing does (did) your job require?

37. Ask only if person has a job:

Is there a possibility of getting a better job in your current job situation?
If yes, would this required different skills?
What kinds of reading and writing would be required that are different from your current job?

*****Are there some things that are difficult to read or write on your job?
If yes, how do you manage when this happens?

38. In the future, say ten years from now, what kind of a job do you think you would like to have?

I would like to thank you very much for helping us with the project. We could not do it without you! Next year, we hope that there will be additional funding to continue talking with people about their programs.

39. If we continue our project, would you be interested in talking with us again in the fall?

If yes, would you give us an address and phone where we could contact you?

NAME_____PHONE_____

ADDRESS_____

We would also like to have the help from people who have never attended an adult program?

40. Do you know of anyone like this who might be willing to help by talking with us in the fall?
Would you be willing to ask them if they would be interested in helping us?
(If yes) would you let us know their name and address if they say yes.

If possible obtain-don't insist - NAME OF OTHER PEOPLE